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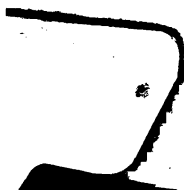
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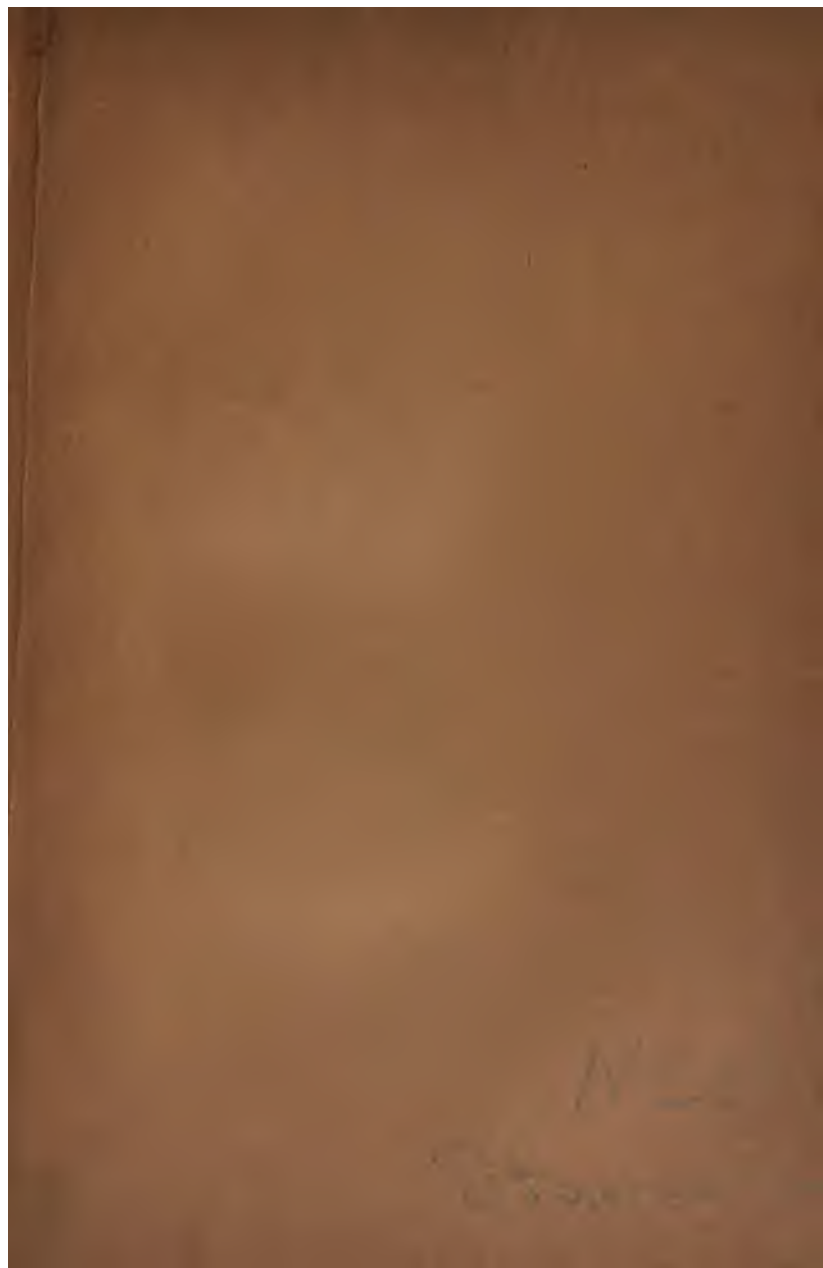
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LUMLEY, THE PAINTER

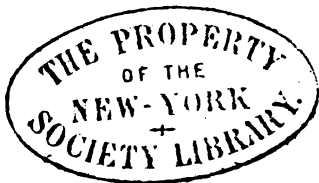
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LUMLEY, THE PAINTER



BY

~~JOHN STRANGE WINTER~~

pseud. of

AUTHOR OF

"BOOTLES' BABY," "IN LUCK'S WAY," "MRS. BOB," "BUTTONS," ETC.

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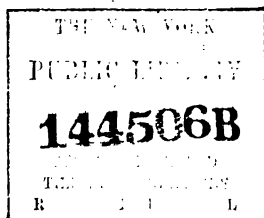
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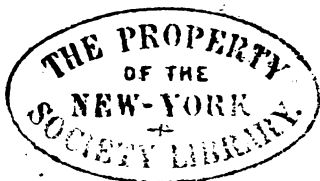
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LUMLEY THE PAINTER.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. JOCK.

"Love at its commencement is a trickling stream ; but when it hath gained ascendancy, it is a wide sea."

YES," said Mrs. Jock Airlie—Mrs. Jock, everyone called her—"I go down to-morrow by the twelve train."

"Why—but why?" asked a man's voice, in accents expressive of the utmost dismay. "Why? That's what I want to know."

"Oh! well, because I am tired of London. I can't breathe, I can't sleep, I can't eat here. I'm tired of everything and everybody—myself most of all."

"But you'll be yourself just the same when you're in Essex," the man expostulated.

"Not a bit of it," Mrs. Jock replied. "Mrs. Jock in a silk frock in London, fighting fiercely for

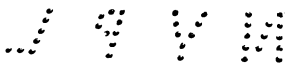
lobster salad at one o'clock in the morning, and Mrs. Jock at what an old gentleman just now called 'my country seat' are two different persons. Here I'm tired and bored and ill. There I'm fresh and brisk and gay. Here I'm idle and haven't a thought in my head—there my brain positively teems with ideas and my work gets done by a kind of magic. Why? Oh, I can't tell you that—it's the air, I suppose. Anyway, I love it, and to-morrow I'm off. Why, the very thought makes me so gay I could dance like a child."

"But Airlie—what does he say?"

"Jock just loves it. He has been worrying to go ever since the weather changed," she replied. "Oh, you needn't waste any of your pity over Jock, I assure you."

"But where is this—this seat of yours?" another man asked.

"My seat, nine bedrooms including the attics!" Mrs. Jock laughed. "Oh! it's on the Essex coast just a rambling old farm-house standing rather high, with quaint old doors and cupboards everywhere and tall wooden chimney-shelves. There is nothing to do excepting tennis and driving about; it's just in fact, a picturesque shanty, but it's quiet and fresh, and a rest, and we love it."



"And you take your youngsters?"

"Why yes, of course—we take everyone."

"And shut up your house here?"

"Practically! That is, we leave a caretaker."

"I see. And are there people down there?"

"Not to speak of. Such as there are did not trouble us much last year."

"But are you not dull?"

"Never—I can safely say we never spent a dull moment in all our five months there last year. Why, my dear man, you *can't* be dull in the country."

"Oh! can't you? I didn't know," doubtfully.

"Besides Vere Nugent is going down with us," Mrs. Jock went on.

"Vere—Miss Nugent," in intense surprise, "but why?"

"Why? Well, perhaps because I asked her," the lady retorted.

"Of course—but—but you surprise me, that is all.

She fell back from the group a little, and another voice took up the task of questioning the lady.

"But, my dear Mrs. Airlie," it said—and it was a smooth, oily, feminine voice—"you cannot mean that you are going away for more than a few days."

"Yes, until October or so."

"But the season," the other said, "how can you possibly go away in the season?"

Mrs. Jock laughed. "Oh, what has the season to do with me, or with you either? See here, dear lady, dip your finger in a bowl of water and see the the sort of hole you would leave when you take it out. *That's* the kind of hole you or I would leave in the London season. There," she added in an undertone, "I've vexed her, for she gone. Well I can't help it. I do hate such humbug and pretension—two afternoon teas and a Sunday lunch party, and we call it 'the season'; it makes me angry."

"But we were not thinking of afternoon teas or even of Sunday lunch-parties," put in a man smiling; "we shall all miss *you* dreadfully, Mrs. Jock."

"Yes, I know you will, and I like you to miss me. I hope you'll love me the more, when I come back again, for my absence. But you would all be much more dreadfully sorry if I pined away in the mad gayeties of South Kensington, and there was no Mrs. Jock to write sweet little stories to make you cry and think of the innocent days when you still had ideals and tried to live up to them. No, it's no use saying pretty things to me, Mr. Scott; to-morrow I

take my flight, and only something *very*, very choice will tempt me back even for an hour."

For a little time the gay group talked together, and Mrs. Jock Airlie remained its centre; then she looked at the first man who had spoken of her flight. "Take me down to get some supper, George," she said in a tone which betokened much friendliness between them.

"What is the matter?" she asked, as they went down the stairs, "you seem very dull to-night. What is it?"

"I wish you weren't going away," he said, dolefully.

"Do you? But why?" she asked. She was puzzled, distinctly puzzled. What could this mean? Not that her dear old friend George Lumley was—Oh no, it was preposterous. There had been men, plenty of them, who had been inclined to make fools of themselves over the popular Mrs. Jock Airlie, whose graceful little figure and brilliant coloring were as fascinating as the charm of her clever brain and keen tongue. But George Lumley she had known long and intimately—far too intimately for any idea of that kind. She had seen him through many an affair, had been his confidante for years, had called him George every since the first week

she had known him, I think because she was so relieved to find that the great painter whose work she had worshipped was so simple and charming an individual. And this new George Lumley—this George with a stricken sort of look in his bluish eyes, with a downcast expression on his kindly, rugged features, this George who was preoccupied and uninterested in manner—well, this George was a revelation, and Mrs. Jock was dismayed and distressed by him.

She stopped short at the foot of the stairs. The hall was more or less deserted, for the hour was late, and nearly all the guests not in the drawing-room were at supper. And she turned her brilliant little face sharply round upon him and said, "I don't understand you. What's the matter?"

George Lumley shook himself together. "The matter, Mrs. Jock"—her friends, her intimate friends, that is, did sometimes call her so—"Oh, nothing—nothing, I assure you. What should be the matter? Except, indeed, that you are going away months before any of your friends expected it. It is hard on us, you know, to have one of our pleasantest houses cut off."

But Mrs. Jock did not take the pretty compliment as it was uttered. "No, George, my friend, that is

not the reason for your melancholy at all. It's something quite different. Do you think I have forgotten how, when Jock and I went off to America, you gave us our last supper party and proposed our healths in the funniest speech I ever listened to; and how you were one of those who saw us safe on board with a cargo of rice and old slippers for luck, so that the whole ship's company thought Jock and I were bride and groom, and received the mention of the children with shouts of laughter? And you were the gayest of the gay then, my dear George, so you see it won't do to try to put me off with pretty speeches about your grief at my going away—it won't indeed."

"Mrs. Jock, I'm awfully sorry—" he began earnestly, when she cut him short.

"George, I'll tell you what the difference is. You were heart-whole then—you're not now. And you have never told me one word about it, not one word. I think it's very mean of you, George—Who is it?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Jock—" began he deprecatingly.

"Who is it?" she asked, fixing him with her radiant eyes.

"Mrs. Jock," he said humbly, "don't ask me any more, *please*, I—at least, I don't think it's quite—quite—fair—I mean—Oh, forgive me, Mrs. Jock."

"You mean that you don't mean to tell me," remarked Mrs. Jock, severely. "Very well—I was going to ask you to come down to the Fish Ponds from Saturday to Monday, but since you don't—"

"Oh, but I do. I wish you would ask me down," he said eagerly. "I'm like you, Mrs. Jock, I'm sick and weary of London, of the sham and the humbug, and the smell of the paints. And I want a breath of fresh air off the North Sea so badly, Mrs. Jock; I'm choking for it."

The sudden earnestness of his face and voice mollified the little scribe and she laughed gayly.

"Then you shall come. Jock comes down by the half-past five to-morrow night just in time for dinner. Can you manage that?"

"I might—I'll try. I have the Duchess sitting to me in the afternoon. If I can get off in time I'll meet Jock at the train; if I cannot, may I come down the next morning?"

"Of course, but you will try to come with Jock?"

"Indeed I will," he answered, and then he tucked her hand under his arm in a way that was quite his own. "And now let us go and see if there is any supper left."

Little Mrs. Jock was more puzzled than ever. The sad air with which he had come down stairs had

vanished, he was himself again—the dearest, most genial, popular man in all London. She looked up at him in something like dismay. Could it be possible that dear old George had taken ideas into his head that she—but no, it could not be! George knew, had known all along that Jock was her adoration. George knew that sad story in her past, knew how Jock with his gay laugh, his happy go-lucky air, had bustled into her desolate heart like a summer breeze sweeping the last cobwebs of a dead love out of it. Oh! it couldn't be that, it was impossible; and yet, why had a few words, a careless invitation to a plain little country shanty chased the shadows from his sad eyes, and transformed him from a melancholy George whom she did not know, into his own genial self, with whom half the women in London were hopelessly in love?

She watched him curiously as he moved about getting her lobster salad and a clean glass. "I'll go and look out for something to drink," he said in his pleasant confidential tones. "They're an uncommon thirsty lot to-night—really I think I never saw so many dead men on one supper-table before."

He was away but a minute or two, coming back with a bottle of champagne in his hand. "Now I'm going to enjoy my supper," he said, smiling at her.

"George," said Mrs. Jock suddenly, "did I tell you that Vere Nugent is going to the Fish Ponds with us?"

"Is she?" indifferently. "Let me give you a little more of the mayonnaise, Mrs. Jock, it's very superior."

"No, it isn't Vere," the little woman's thoughts ran, "and it isn't me—George Lumley would not be such an idiot. Well—I—am—puzzled."

CHAPTER II.

THE FISH PONDS.

"As unto the bow the cord is,
So unto the man is woman,
Though she bends him, she obeys him,
Though she draws him, yet she follows,
Useless each without the other."

"I CAN breathe here isn't it sweet—isn't it lovely?" Mrs. Jock said to her friend as they strolled together round the gardens of the Fish Ponds. "Why are people such fools as to spend all the glorious summer frizzling in stuffy drawing-rooms and struggling up and down narrow staircases, when they might be in such air as this and really living instead of fighting for breath?"

"I suppose because the men who rule the State want to shoot in the autumn and hunt in the winter and spring," answered Miss Nugent quietly.

Mrs. Jock laughed. "You're so dreadfully matter-of-fact, Vere," she exclaimed. "Of course, I know that that is just it. Only it's so silly that Mrs.

Thompkins and Mrs. Threp-P'ny-Bit should arrange their little festivities to suit a class of people they never even see. Why don't they honestly let the season slide?"

"Because Mrs. Thompkins and Mrs. Threp-P'ny-Bit can only afford to go away for three or four weeks in the year, and they naturally go in August, which is intolerable in London. You've never been in London in August, my dear Mrs. Jock; you don't know anything about it."

"Perhaps not. By the bye, did I tell you that George Lumley is coming down with Jock? At least, I expect he is."

"No! Is he? How nice for you."

"Why for me?" sharply.

"Well, he belongs to you, doesn't he?"

"Not at all, not at all. He is as much Jock's friend as mine. We both like him immensely. By the bye, you like George Lumley, don't you, Vere?" anxiously.

She was so anxious to satisfy her curiosity about George Lumley's state of mind, that she let her anxiety be a little too plainly seen. Miss Nugent's face and tone, however, were as expressionless as the most stringent society etiquette could possibly demand.

"Oh! yes. I think he is charming," she replied in ordinary conventional tone—"but then everybody does. Half the women I know say of George Lumley, 'Oh, he's mine; he's my own especial pet man.' Of course one wouldn't dare to say one didn't like him."

"But you do?"

"Yes! I think he is charming," Miss Nugent answered. Mrs. Jock sighed within herself. "No, it's not Vere. I *wonder* who it is?"

It was evident that there was no information to be got out of Miss Nugent. That young lady was standing watching a friendly scuffle between a fox-terrier pup and a fine black cat, who were tumbling one another over and over on the velvet-like turf.

"How do you like the place, Vere?" Mrs. Jock asked in a sharp half-impatient tone.

"It's lovely," the girl answered. There was no apathy or indifference about her face now, every feature was full of expression and life, her eyes were shining, her lips smiling, her voice was full of joy. "It's a lovely place, Mrs. Jock. You ought to be a happy woman—a charming house in Town, a place like this to fly away to for rest, hosts of friends, heaps of admirers, and the man of your

heart to stand by you through all—to say nothing of your name and your not exactly ugly face. Oh, you lucky little woman, you ought to be happy.”

“Well, I am,” returned Mrs. Jock, quite meekly for her, “if only——” She broke off short and stood looking up rather wistfully at her tall young friend.

“If——*what?*” asked Miss Nugent, wondering what more the little woman could possibly want.

“Oh! nothing, nothing; I was only thinking about something. We will go in and have our tea. You’ll go to the station to meet Jock and George Lumley, of course.”

“I’ll do anything you like, Mrs. Jock,” said Miss Nugent easily. “Life seems to me delightfully vague and easy in this out-of-the-world spot; I have no wants, no desires—I am content to let events occur.”

“A very proper frame of mind to begin a visit in a little house in the country. Come, I see Nelson at the window making signs that tea is ready, let us go.”

But ten minutes later Mrs. Jock stirred the fire which burnt in the grate of the pretty drawing-room into a brighter blaze, and looked up at her guest.

"You said just now that life was so easy here. In a way it is. But when you have once seen me tearing my hair and racking my brains to try and get an idea when none are to be had, you won't think then that a novelist's life is all sunshine, or that it's exactly easy to make a rise in the price of pocket-handkerchiefs. I've known the time," the little woman went on thoughtfully, "when Jock has followed me round the house with an ink-pot, that was when I had an idea and couldn't find a cool enough spot to work in. I believe I finished writing 'Flitters' on the stairs, that being the only place in the house where the flies didn't bother me. But it is not *all* velvet, I assure you, Vere."

"I daresay not. Still I would put up with a good many worries to have your place," Vere replied. "*You* don't know what it is to feel that there is nothing about you to lift you out of the ordinary run of everyday woman. I feel sometimes that I should be entirely happy and contented if I could only act or sing or write or do anything, instead of living on my poor little hundred a year eking my time out by visits, and waiting till someone comes along to marry me."

"Vere, what a horrible idea," Mrs. Jock cried.

"Yes, it is, that's why I hate it so," said the girl

coolly," and it's what nine girls out of ten do sit down to wait for, only they're not all honest enough to say so. I wouldn't mind work or the worry, if I could only do something."

"But why don't you?"

"Because I haven't got brains enough. I was born a lady, and though I'm not good-looking exactly, I've got a *chic* air, and I make a twopenny-ha'-penny frock look like a Bond Street confection. Beyond that I'm the most ordinary young person that ever lived, and I suppose in due course of time I shall meet my fate and marry, and live the rest of my time without an idea or an ambition beyond my housekeeping and my visiting-list."

Mrs. Jock was more convinced than ever that Vere Nugent was not in George Lumley's thoughts. "Well," she said in a quite far-away sort of tone, "I suppose I shouldn't care to be just a nobody now, after having had a sort of a name for six years, but sometimes I get a sort of yearning to be just Mrs. Jock—Jock's wife and nothing else. I think if I were you I should feel—but there, perhaps, I'm wrong. And there's the stanhope; it is time we were off. Put a warm coat on, the air here is dreadfully chilly towards evening."

Thus, when Jock Airlie and the painter came out

of the little station-house, they found the Fish Ponds stanhope drawn by a big gray in charge of Mrs. Jock awaiting them, and all George Lumley's artist soul leapt into his eyes as he saw her companion, who, if she was not "exactly good-looking," possessed a cloud of copper-brown hair such as was not dimmed by the glory of Mrs. Jock's Venetian-tinted tresses; and she had also a wonderful turn of the head, a lovely curve of the long throat, and a pair of the most exquisite eyes of the deepest forget-me-not blue.

"How do we go back?" Jock asked, seeing that his wife was about to vacate her place.

"I'm going behind with George," she replied.

"No, Mrs. Jock, I won't let you," cried Miss Nugent, hurriedly.

"Oh, yes, I would rather. Jock likes driving better than I do," said the little lady, decidedly.

She was indeed already in her place behind, and motioned to Lumley to get up beside her. He was nothing loth, because from that point of vantage he was able to study Miss Nugent's head, and occasionally her profile, as she turned her head to speak to Airle.

"You don't mind sitting here, I hope?" said Mrs. Jock, as they started.

George Lumley turned upon her with what was almost a start. "Mrs. Jock," he said, impressively, "I am perfectly happy."

"I hardly expected you. I thought the attractions of the Fish Ponds would pale before the fascinations of a duchess," she laughed.

"The attractions of the Fish Ponds pale before nothing," he said with emphasis; and then he gradually fell to studying Miss Nugent again, lending the while his ear and a little of his attention to his hostess's remarks.

He himself believed that he was succeeding admirably in doing two things at once, but it was not for long. Presently his attention wandered a little, and one of his replies was scarcely to the point. Mrs. Jock turned her head sharply, and caught him in the very act of gazing at Vere with all his soul in his eyes. "*George*," she said, suddenly.

"Mrs. Jock," he said, reddening.

"Do you know who Teddie Bickersteth is going to marry?" she asked, making use of the first question that arose in her mind.

"Teddie Bickersteth? Why, Miss de Longueville, to be sure," he replied promptly, wondering, as the young lady was an intimate friend of Mrs.

Jock's, why she should have asked him for information on the subject.

"Oh! I wasn't sure that you knew," she rejoined, rather lamely.

In her own heart, however, she was rejoicing greatly—for she had found out George Lumley's secret. It was Vere Nugent, and she had got the pair quietly and quite unconsciously down at the Fish Ponds, where there were no distractions, very few visitors, and few interruptions. She was almost bursting with her discovery, and spent the rest of the time before they reached home weaving all manner of beneficent schemes for the delectation of the pair.

"We need not go to dress for half-an-hour," she said, as she went into the dainty little drawing-room. "Yes, I always have the chicks down, as you know, George. They have heard the wheels already.—Oh! here they are. Are you cold, Vere?"

"Not at all—thanks to your orders to wear a warm coat," answered the girl smilingly.

"Then do sing that song you were singing the other day at Mrs. Jervis's—you know the one I mean. Yes," as Vere struck a chord or two, "sing that."

The girl played a dreamy prelude, while George Lumley stood by watching, with eager eyes, the movements of her slender hands over the keys, listening with greedy ears to the rich and sympathetic tones of her voice as she sang—

“ You love me not, or else while I am yearning,
You would not stand with folded hands apart!
With cold, calm eyes, that once with tears were burning,
Tears of wild love against my beating heart.

Then the piteous refrain—

“ Only last year, only last year,
Ah! love, my love, do you remember,
Only last year in sweet September.”

CHAPTER III.

GOOSEBERRIES.

"Let everyone, of every condition, avoid curiosity and all enquiry into things that concern them not."

WHEN Mrs. Jock had fully decided in her own mind that Vere Nugent was an attraction so great to George Lumley that he did not even want to confide the fact to her, she at once determined upon a certain course of action, which was that she would do everything in her power to further the marriage.

Now this was a very magnanimous resolution on Mrs. Jock's part, for George Lumley was of all her men-friends (and she had many) the one she valued the most highly. She was very proud of her own position in the world, this little woman, and she was always especially proud of the friendship of certain people, and that of the great painter most of all. It was an endless satisfaction to her that her friends knew and acknowledged that Lumley, the painter, was more often to be seen at her house than at any

other, that, when they met at parties, Lumley would always take her down to supper, that at most dinners where they met, Lumley was, as a matter of course, put beside her; and for her voluntarily to give Lumley up to a mere girl, to determine to do everything that she could to further his unmistakable desires, was about the most generous thing that any little woman ever did in this world.

But Mrs. Jock was generous. You see she had passed through a rough and bitter experience in the days of her youth, and out of the blackest night of despair she had suddenly and unexpectedly found herself in a blaze of heaven-sent sunshine. She adored her Jock, she was perfectly happy and she wanted everyone else to be as happy as she was. So that evening while Vere Nugent was singing from memory in the firelight, while the children, Beta, aged six, and Frankie, two years younger, were swarming over her, as children do over a mother who loves them better than her gowns, Mrs. Jock's busy and fertile brain was very busy thinking out schemes for the future, which would very considerably have startled the other occupants of the room had they been put into plain words.

And Vere Nugent sang on song after song until the maid came for the youngsters and Mrs. Jock

sprang up declaring that they would not have time to get into the tea-gowns which were the nearest approach to conventionality that she allowed at the Fish Ponds. And so they all scurried upstairs with just a quarter of an hour before the dinner would be on the table.

Now with the best intentions in the world you cannot greatly further matrimonial schemes in a party of four during the time that dinner is in progress. And indeed Mrs. Jock, who was a very sensible woman, did not try to do so, but simply gave herself up to the enjoyment of the hour.

"It's so jolly down here," she said once—"no horrid parties to go to, no post to catch if you don't happen to have a party on."

"But your letters have to be written all the same," Jock Airlie suggested.

"Well, yes, in a sense they have, only the day seems so many hours longer in the country, and when there's no post after six o'clock you don't ruin your evening trying to get level with your responsibilities and—and—well, it's just like heaven here and I'm thankful to find myself in it." She was thankful too, for she was a hard-worked little woman, who would never lose her place for want of energy. "Sing to me again, Vere," she said, when she found herself

once more in the drawing-room, lighted by a pretty shaded lamp now—"your voice *is* so sympathetic, it thrills me through and through—it makes me feel all at once in a writing mood, as if I must sit down and write the saddest sweetest story that ever I cried over as I wrote. When I'm rich"—she was very fond of talking about the time when she would be rich, which with her, meant anything between twenty and thirty thousand a year—"when I'm rich I shall look out for a girl with a real rich sympathetic voice and I shall just have her to sing all the touchingest songs to me by the hour together."

Vere looked at her smilingly. "Should I do for that post?"

"I should think you would."

"Then why don't you try me? I will willingly give you my voice in exchange for my board and lodging."

There was more than a touch of seriousness in the girl's voice, as if she really meant what she said. Mrs. Jock, however, took it quite as a joke, and laughed merrily.

"Oh! my dear, you'll be married and singing to a charming husband, I hope, before I can afford such a luxury as a songstress of my own."

"That is very doubtful," said Vere coolly, as she

moved to the piano; but whether she meant that it was doubtful if she would be married long before Mrs. Jock could afford herself a certain luxury or whether Mrs. Jock would assuredly be soon able to afford anything that she wanted, she did not explain, and she struck the opening chords of a song before Mrs. Jock could ask her.

Before she was half way through the song the two men came in, bringing with them a faint scent of their cigarettes—Jock Airlie going by instinct to the hearthrug and George Lumley establishing himself in a big basket-chair as near to the piano as he could very well get.

“Another,” he pleaded, when voice and music ceased.

“Yes, another, dear,” said Mrs. Jock, who was wandering restlessly about the room, aimlessly changing the position of the flower vases and photograph frames.

So Vere began again, and while Lumley drank in the beauty of her lovely head and throat, and lay back in the big chair his senses soothed by the rich tones of her voice, Mrs. Jock made a little ghost of a sign to her lord and quietly disappeared through the doorway which led into the conservatory, whither he in a moment or so as quietly followed her.

"What is it?" he asked, in a loud whisper.

"Gooseberry," she whispered back—"come and sit here by me."

There was a pleasant seat at the end of the long conservatory, and Jock sat down and put his arm around his wife's waist contentedly enough.

"You can smoke, Jock," she said presently.

"I don't care to, dearest," he answered.

"I'd rather you would, Jock," she said. "It will be a good excuse for our not staying in there. You couldn't smoke there when she is singing, although I do let you smoke upstairs and downstairs, and in my lady's chamber."

"But why do we want an excuse?"

"Well, because—oh! you stupid old thing, don't you see?"

He looked at her in the clear moonlight for half a minute before a gleam of real understanding came to him. "What! you don't mean—old George and her?" jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the door of the drawing-room.

"Of course I do. And I don't want to spoil it by being always in the road," she replied. "That's the worst of being such a small party, there's no getting away from each other without making it too conspicuous."

Now Jock Airlie was very big, and like many big men, he was not as quick to see what was going on around him as his keen-witted little wife was. He looked at her incredulously for a few minutes, and then burst out—"Well, what on earth can he see in *her*?"

Mrs. Jock was almost angry. She seized hold of his arm and shook it. "Jock, you stupid boy, they'll hear you," she cried under her breath. "It doesn't matter what you see or don't see. You are not wanted to marry her, so it is immaterial whether you can see anything in her or not! George Lumley——"

"Has got to, I suppose?" he said dryly.

Mrs. Jock nearly cried in her vexation at his obtuseness.

"Oh! Jock, what did I ever take a fancy to you for?" she exclaimed. "My poor father always said I was too sharp to live, and that I should marry the biggest fool on earth. If I didn't quite do that I——"

"Went within an ace of it. Quite so, my dearest. Well, you were saying that——"

"That George Lumley is over head and ears in love with her," she explained in a rapid whisper. "It's no doing of mine. Should I be likely to

want George Lumley to marry *anybody*? Is it reasonable to think I would actually plot to get rid of my smartest man-friend, the one that all the other women are envying me? Of course not—only when after puzzling for days to find out what is the matter with him, I suddenly find out it's the very girl I've got staying in the house, I naturally want to help him if I can. I'm not selfish, whatever other faults I may happen to have."

Jock Airlie broke into a smothered roar of laughter and gathering his little wife close to his capacious breast, kissed her a dozen times as passionately as if he had been engaged seven days instead of married nearly seven years. Mrs. Jock wriggled free and shook herself into order again as a sleek cat does when it has been roughly hugged in the cruelly affectionate clasp of a child.

"Then it's as good as settled," he remarked, smiling broadly.

"Nothing of the kind," she returned sharply, "Vere is a very uncommon girl. She has the queerest ideas about marrying and all that, and unless she really likes George I am sure nothing would induce her to take him, though how any girl could resist him, I can't imagine."

"Perhaps she won't. You're quite sure that it is

"Certain sure," she replied.

"It'll be a deuce of a good match for her," he went on, "old George is such a thundering good sort, all round, to say nothing of his position in his profession. Oh! I shouldn't think she'd be such a fool as to say no."

"She will if she doesn't really care for him," Mrs. Jock replied with conviction—"and if dear old George comes off badly, I shall never never forgive myself."

"Nor her either, I should think," Jock added.

"Well, we cannot honestly blame a girl for being true to herself—not if one has any belief in the sanctity of marriage, that is," she said, with, for her, quite unusual severity.

Jock drew her closer again. "Wouldn't you have married me if——"

"If I hadn't liked you as well as I did?" she ended. "No, Jock, that I would not. It's true that you were big and good-looking and well-off and all that I most admired in a man; and yet—yet, if you don't get just that one touch that makes all the difference between esteem and real downright honest love, marriage must be a very poor business. No, Jock, don't smother me again, please—oh!" she escaped again, "I often do think it's a mercy I really

do love you as well as I do, for I should hate and loathe you to a certainty if I didn't—I wonder why you can't love me half a yard away without wanting to squeeze the life out of me about every ten minutes? Oh!—and here are the others."

"Very busy playing gooseberry, Mrs. Jock?" said Lumley, with a quizzical air.

Mrs. Jock laughed. "Yes, I know. I would blush, only that Jock has long ago worn out my power of blushing," she said. "Has tea come in? Then let us have it and then go for a walk down the drive. We shall all sleep better for it.

CHAPTER IV.

VERE, THE MARTYR.

"She doth little kindnesses which most leave undone or despise."

"THERE isn't much to see in this part of the world," Mrs. Jock remarked during the course of breakfast the following morning, "but what little there is I want you to see, Vere."

"You're very kind, Mrs. Jock," the girl returned gratefully.

"Well, I believe I am kind," said Mrs. Jock, with a delightful candor which was one of her most charming characteristics; "but at the same time, as you will find out for yourself, my dear, in a way I'm a thoroughly bad hostess, because I cannot give all my time up to my visitors. I have my work to do, and they have to look after themselves until dinner-time nine days out of ten.

"Which is perhaps the reason why the Fish Ponds is such a popular house, Mrs. Jock," said Lumley, smiling. "It is very dreadful and unpleasant when

your hostess makes out a chart of you doings for the day and sends you out perhaps *tête-à-tête* with the lady some other man in the house is in love with, to her chagrin, his despair, and your unmitigated disgust. Don't apologise for your charming Liberty Hall—we all love it too well to wish it altered in the least."

"Then I will not. But as Miss Nugent has never been here before, I must have a sort of idea of what she is going to do, or else I may find at dinner-time that she has been neglected and lonely all day."

"Oh! I shall be all right," said Vere, "pray don't worry about me. I shall be quite happy with the children if you leave me to my own devices."

"I think not to-day, dear—the chicks will be perfectly wild and unmanageable for a week or so, they love the country so. By the bye, Jock, what are you going to do?"

"Oh! I shall be awfully busy all the morning, darling. I've got to get all my fishing-tackle in order—and at least a dozen letters to write for you."

"And you, George," she asked, highly pleased at her Jock's ingenuity.

"I—oh; I am quite at your service," Lumley replied.

"Well, I'll tell you what I do wish you would do," Mrs. Jock said eagerly—"if you would take either the stanhope or the pony-trap and drive Vere into East Court and show her the outside look of the place and bring me some fish, you would be doing me a real service."

"I shall only be too charmed," he said promptly.

Miss Nugent, however, sat bolt upright, for she did not by any means see being, as she thought, palmed off on to this important man, who was probably swearing at fate that he must pass the next two hours or more in the company of a girl whom, ten chances to one, he looked upon as an unmitigated nuisance.

"I would so much rather idle about here, really," she said, hurriedly. "There is nothing I enjoy so thoroughly."

"Miss Nugent!" exclaimed Lumley in accents of deepest reproach.

She flushed a little as her eyes met his.

"Oh! well, of course I didn't mean anything personal to you, Mr. Lumley, but——" and then she broke off short and looked at her resolute little hostess with every signal of distress.

"Oh! I quite understand, Vere. I too quite hate to be parcelled out with or without my own

consent. But I really do want the fish ; the Squire and his wife are coming to dine to-night, and you know what a country dinner-table looks like without fish—and I *don't* think I'd *quite* trust George to choose it—and we must have some ice—a shillings-worth I think—and—and really it would be very kind of you both if you would help me out of the dilemma. I daresay you both think I might send Jock, but Jock has fishing on the brain, and men are so intolerably selfish when they're married—he doesn't care a button whether I give the Squire fish for dinner or not.”

“I'll catch you some fish if I can, Ruth,” said Jock, with imperturbable good nature—“if I can, mind.”

Mrs. Jock elevated her little nose instantly, and laughed.

“If you can—thousand thanks, dear. And fancy Mrs. Fergusson's face if I gave her roach or carp for dinner. No, dear Jock, the fish-ponds are very charming, but they're not productive of a saving to our fishmonger's bill. Then you will go, you two dear things? I shall have an easy mind all day, if you will.”

In the face of this appeal Vere Nugent had no choice but to put on her coat and hat and to take

her seat in the smart little cart which Lumley had chosen as being the most suitable for the expedition.

I must say that for a man who had professedly been avoiding matrimony all his life and the intricate and slippery paths which lead thereunto, he proved himself possessed of a very pretty ingenuity in those little dodges and devices which help the pilgrim of love on the way toward the goal of wedded bliss. It seems to me as it seemed to him that day, that no matter in how cold and stiff a mood you set out in a small wobbly pony cart behind a frisky little sleek-coated person who is never two minutes in the same mind, who wants to crawl up one hill and tear down another, who stops demurely to pretend to bite viciously at a fly and takes advantage of the opportunity to get a mouthful or two of the sweet young grass a-growing by the way-side, you must end by becoming perfectly friendly with the other occupant thereof—taking for granted that there is no positive dislike or bone of contention between you. And so with these two. I am bound to say that Miss Nugent came down dressed for the expedition with the air and feeling of a martyr. She was very polite, and very particular in taking all Mrs. Jock's instructions as to the

kind of fish and the quantity she was to bring. "Salmon, if you can get it," said Mrs. Jock elaborately, well knowing, wicked little woman that she was, that salmon was not to be had in East Court for love or money—"if you can't find salmon, bring any good fish that you can get—enough for eight persons and don't whatever you do, forget the ice. We are lost without the ice."

"Is there anything else?" Miss Nugent inquired.

"I think not, dear, I think not. And I hope you'll enjoy yourselves—I'm sure you will—George is delightful to go anywhere with."

This last was spoken in a discreet whisper and Miss Nugent vouchsafed no comment upon it, not even a smile. As a matter of fact she was boiling over with anger; she felt that she had been thrust upon him whether he would or not, and not even his reproachful exclamation of "Miss Nugent!" had been enough to reassure her.

They had jogged along the road for full a quarter of a mile before Lumley realized the frame of mind that the girl was in. When he did so he lost no time in trying to break down the wall of icy reserve which she had built around herself.

"Miss Nugent," he said abruptly, finding that she only spoke in the coldest tones and in monosyl-

lables. "I hope it doesn't bore you to take this drive."

She flushed scarlet. "Oh, no; it's—it's that—only—I wasn't sure whether you——"

"Whether I should be bored or not," he suggested looking down upon her with twinkling eyes (and Lumley, even when most in earnest, had a desperately keen sense of humor.

"Well," she began a little awkwardly, "you don't know how horrid it is to be disposed of without——"

"Oh, yes, I do," he answered, finding that she stopped short, at a loss for words in which to express her thoughts. "I've been victimised so often that I know exactly what you mean. But in this case I do hope you won't mind, because I did want to drive you into East Court dreadfully badly."

"Really." She looked straight up into his honest eyes in her surprise and Lumley smiled down upon her, and somehow they seemed to be friends all in a minute.

And as Mrs. Jock had very truly said, Lumley was delightful to go anywhere with. He was amusing and had a deferential air which implied a compliment with every word that he spoke; and being, as he was, more utterly in love than he had ever been in all his five-and-thirty years before, he not

unnaturally exerted himself as much as possible to please her.

"I think we had better put this person up," he said, as they turned into the main street of the little sea-side town. "It is five miles home, and if I remember anything of East Court, we shall have to hunt the town pretty well over before we get so much as a little under-sized crab for our pains. I think we had better put up."

Happily Miss Nugent had no opinions on the subject. He had come out in charge of the pony, and for the matter of that of her also, and he was therefore responsible for taking them safely home again. So as she made no objection to the proceeding, Lumley put up at the principal hotel, and they set off on their quest of fish together.

They found, exactly as he had foretold, that they had to hunt the little town over, and in truth they did not find it even then. No, there was no fish in East Court, the different fishmongers told them—the morning's take had gone straight up to London as quickly as it could be packed—there might be a boatload or two ashore in an hour or an hour and a half. Yes, he would be down to supply several orders he had. He could get them anything they wanted if they liked to wait for it.

Eventually they decided to wait until the midday boats came in. As they walked down the little street Lumley looked at his watch. "Just eleven now," he said—"well, it's about ten minutes past. What shall we do with ourselves?"

"Go down on the beach, I should think," she replied.

"Good! we will," he agreed. "Wouldn't you like some lollipops to eat the while? Somehow, I think lollipops and sea-beach go so well together."

"Oh! do you like lollipops?" she said.

"Oh, don't I?" he answered. "They always make me feel young again. Now this is the best shop in East Court for that sort of thing—I have the advantage over you, you see. I have been at the Fish Ponds before, and I know the ways of the place and the likes and dislikes of my friends, Beta and Frankie."

"You have come with them into East Court?" she said by way of saying something.

"Many a time. Now, don't you think those marzipan *bon-bons* look very suggestive? And these chocolates? I should think a pound or two of those might satisfy the young cormorants, eh? Yes, a pound of each, and will you send them up to Mr. Airlie's trap at the Rose and Crown? Thanks.

Now, Miss Nugent, what shall we choose for our own delectation? Those are awfully good I'm, sure. A pound of those then."

In less than ten minutes they were sitting down among the rocks and seaweed on the beach, the bag of lollipops between them. Vere sitting gazing out over the water with her wonderful eyes; Lumley, the great painter, lying on his back watching her.

CHAPTER V.

WE ARE TWO!

“For to-morrow will prove but another to-day,
With its measure of joy and of sorrow.

FRIDAY to Monday is not a long time and the more happy you are the sooner does time seem to pass. That especial Friday to Monday seemed to go by like magic to the people at the Fish-Ponds.

In due time the pair in the pony-cart turned up with the fish, having thought it wisest to lunch at the Rose and Crown, not a little to Vere Nugent's secret dismay, in spite of her having allowed herself to be persuaded into doing so on the plea that the cook at the Fish-Ponds would be busy for the dinner-party of the evening.

“We got your fish, and a pretty hunt and a nice long wait we had for that same,” Lumley remarked triumphantly to Mrs. Jock, who came out of her study proudly flushed with the consciousness of a good morning's work.

"Oh! well, I daresay you were not much bored by each other," she answered laughingly. "Our cook will be simply rejoiced. She has no faith in East Court fishmongers and hates the country. She only condescends to come here because it is good for me."

"I don't think we bored each other much, eh, Miss Nugent?" said Lumley.

"I haven't been bored," she rejoined quickly.

"Ah! my dear," cried Mrs. Jock gaily, "I knew you would not be. I know this man's capabilities as a cicerone well. And you were so angry with me when you went off—I saw it, sure enough. But, joking apart, I did want you both out of the way this morning, for I had a certain amount of work to get through, and I couldn't have done it with you two about the place. Jock has the gift of effacing himself when I don't want to be disturbed. I often wish I could do it as effectually. Well"—with a change of tone—"are you good for a game of tennis?"

"I am at your service," said Lumley promptly. He nearly always made the same reply, and this utter conventionality both of his tone and manner seemed to take all the heart out of the girl whom he was most anxious to make friendly and at home with him. He was down in his spotless flannels

before she had gone to put on her shoes and loose skirt, and as he drew near to her, she was conscious of a fierce thrill, which seemed to shoot through her very heart at the sight of him. He looked so goodly, so strong, such *a man*, with his shirt of creamy flannel open at the throat, with his broad shoulders, his good-natured rugged face with its bluish honest eyes and short fair beard! Or was it his voice and manner—the one so sweet and mellow, the other so kindly and yet so full of courteous dignity—that attracted her so strangely, so sweetly, so irresistibly? She did not know—she could not tell—but she went up to her room with her heart ready to jump into her mouth and with her pulses beating faster than she had ever known them to beat in all her life before. “Vere Nugent—you silly creature,” she muttered to herself as she stood holding her hand hard upon her heaving breast. “What is this man to you? What are you to him? Nothing—absolutely nothing. Are you at *your* age”—she was twenty-two—“going to give yourself away to a man, because he has a charming manner and a musical voice? You fool—you fool—you are nothing to him.”

She walked to the window. Yes, there he was sitting on the garden seat near the tennis-ground with Mrs. Jock, with just the same air of devotion

that she had been attracted by herself! There was nothing in it—all the world knew that Lumley the painter was a flirt, that he meant nothing by his air of chivalrous devotion, that a dozen women in London at that very moment made it their boast, aye, and believed it, too, that he was their abject slave forever.

She shook herself together and began with every resolution to make ready for tennis. If Lumley chose to flirt with every woman he met, she would show him that she was his match, more than his match. But be weak enough to fall in love with him—that she never would be.

“How do we play?” she asked, when she joined the others on the lawn.

“I al—ways play with Jock”—declared Mrs. Jock, which was a story, “Nobody understands how to take me like Jock does. I believe you’ll find Mr. Lumley a very good player, Vere—he has that reputation.”

“Very well,” Vere replied—“I will risk Mr. Lumley’s reputation.”

“I hope you will—I think you may”—Lumley said significantly.

“You little wretch,” was Jock’s comment to his wife at that moment, as they moved across the ground together.

"Well, you do prefer playing with me, don't you?" she asked innocently.

"Yes, but why pretend you've never played with Lumley? How do you know he hasn't given you away hours ago. Ruth, my dear, your love of match-making is already tempting you far from the paths of truth and virtue."

"Yes—yes—but I'm not a match-maker, Jock—I hate anything of the kind. I always did. I think match-makers are detestable. In this case I tell you it's altogether different. George is desperately in love with her——"

"When you have quite done slating poor old Jock," came Lumley's pleasant voice across the net at that moment, "we might toss for first turn."

"I wasn't slating Jock—Jock was slating me," Mrs. Jock declared ruefully.

"Really—you look like it," sceptically. "Now, Jock, my friend, rough or smooth?"

"Rough."

"Rough it is. Your turn first," and Lumley turned back towards his partner.

"What was the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing much—Mrs. Jock was apparently explaining something to Jock. Jock likes his explanations in that fashion—lucky chap."

"Why lucky?" she asked.

"Because," he replied quickly, "because he married the woman he wanted to marry, and very few men do that."

"Very few woman either," said Miss Nugent, in an icy tone, as she moved to her own court.

For a moment Lumley stood perfectly still, her words had struck him like a blow or a blast of an easterly wind. She had spoken so bitterly, with such meaning—had she not married the man she wanted to marry? Of course not, for she was Miss Nugent! But to turn the sentence another way, had she wanted to marry some man who had not cared to marry her? It sounded like it, and yet—yet with all his strong man's soul George Lumley hoped, as he had never hoped for anything in all his life before, that it was not so.

They had all their work cut out to hold their own against Jock Airlie and his wife, but they did succeed in winning the sett after a five-all, and then only by a single count. "We are well matched," he said, "but we won and I'm glad of it. I shouldn't have liked to lose my first sett with you, Miss Nugent."

The man's tone and manner were unmistakable, but Vere steeled her heart against him although it was beating uncomfortably fast, believing that he

was but playing with her as he had, according to repute, played with many a woman's heart before. She looked up at him once but only for a moment, because she could not look into their honest depths without betraying the struggle that was going on in her own heart.

"Yes, I'm glad we won," she said simply.

She sang to them again that evening in the gloaming, and Mrs. Jock judiciously effaced herself under pretence—a real excuse this time—of superintending the arrangement of the dinner-table, which she did with such care and the need of so much help from Jock that they were obliged to spend half an hour on the old sofa in the corner admiring their handiwork. The little woman, however, jumped up with a guilty start when she heard the piano stop.

"Come and see my table, Vere—isn't it lovely?" she cried, going to the door and inviting the two to walk in. "There, sir, does that scheme of color suit your artistic eye and please your artistic soul? I hope it does, for it has taken a long time to do."

"Perfectly charming—charming," was Lumley's comment. "And, of course, the effect came easier by the help of the music. I believe in music. I can always paint better when music I like is within hearing."

"Street bands and hurdy-gurdies?" suggested Miss Nugent a little scornfully.

"I said music that I liked," replied the painter quietly.

She flushed a little and moved round the table the better to see her hostess's handiwork. "It is really very lovely, Mrs. Jock," she said—"these shaded pink geraniums are exquisite, and the lampshade to match, too. Did you bring it from Town?"

"I made it," said Mrs. Jock proudly.

Poor Vere!—there was no getting away from her fate. That night Lumley took her in to dinner, and as she sat on the left of the Squire, who was a little deaf in that ear, and never wanted to speak to anyone else if Mrs. Jock was about, she had not the chance of speaking to any one else. And Lumley made the utmost use of his opportunities; he charmed the girl in spite of herself, and lulled to rest for a while that suspicion that after all he was only amusing himself, that the charm of his voice was but the charm that he put forth to all the women he knew, that the story his eyes told was but the same story that was part of his stock-in-trade as a popular man alike in the glittering world of rank and the polished world of wit, the suspicion that he was a flirt and nothing but a

flirt, and that when he had succeeded in taming her heart like a bird to his hand, he would ruthlessly fling it away, not caring whether it broke or not, not even knowing whether she lived or died. ●

Poor, misjudged Lumley! He had no suspicion, excepting that perhaps some man in the time gone by might have wounded the heart of the girl he loved, and so have made it more difficult for those who came after. And he was in love, genuinely, utterly in love. He went to his bed that night dazzled by the glory of her wonderful eyes, the refrain of her song ringing in his ears—

We parted, I and you,
In the tender days
Of love that was real and true;
But fate came between us—
Our dream was o'er—
And forever we are two.

The words written down do not impress one much, but they were set to a dreamy melody with a pathetic ring in the refrain—

Fate came between.
Our dream was o'er.
And forever, and forever—we are two.

CHAPTER VI.

A HALF-PROMISE.

"The time will come when winter will ask us ;
What were you doing all the summer ?"

THE Sabbath had come and gone, a quiet country Sabbath-day, whose heaven-like stillness was broken only by the music of the birds which had their homes in the trees and hedges around and sang their sweet pæans of rejoicing during all the hours of sunshine. They had all gone to church and had whiled away the afternoon playing with the children and visiting the stock and the pigs and other live things on the farm behind the house.

And by tacit consent Vere Nugent had found herself walking up and down the kitchen-garden with Lumley, past the espaliers all in bloom now, past the strawberry-beds, to where the lily-buds were just beginning to show, and they could look over the well-trimmed hedge across the green meadows to the distant line of the sea !

"Miss Nugent," the painter said hurriedly, after

little Beta had come near enough to shout the information that tea was ready, and had then bolted back lest Frankie should get all the cream; "Miss Nugent, I wonder if some day you would do me a great favor?"

"If I can," she answered.

"Well, if I should come down again whilst you are here, may I take a rough sketch of you? It would be a great pleasure and a great service to me."

"Oh, yes—only, I shall not be here forever," she said turning to go towards the house. "But why do you want to sketch me?"

"How shall I explain it? You know we painters are always on the look-out for certain types, for certain colorings! I have in my time waited months for a particular colored hair—I have been waiting many weeks now for the turn that you have to your throat and ear. Then I may count upon it."

"If you are here before I go."

"I shall be," he said confidently.

So the following morning when Mrs. Jock asked him when he was coming down again, asked him too in a tone of admirably done indifference—he said promptly, "On Thursday, if you can do with me."

She raised her eye-brows—"My dear George, as —

you know, we are always delighted to have you. What a pity though that you are obliged to go away between whiles. Can't you possibly remain?"

"Impossible, Mrs. Jock, a thousand thanks, all the same," he replied. "The duchess gives me the two final sittings this week—and I shall not have the chance of others if I miss them. No, I must go, though I hate it. And I do hate it—it's like going back to the treadmill out of paradise."

He looked so profoundly melancholy that Jock Airlie began to laugh. "Georgey, old fellow, you're getting quite pathetically poetic in your old age," he cried.

"I meant it, every word of it," returned the painter simply: "However, I am coming back on Thursday, thanks to your graciousness, Mrs. Jock—and then Miss Nugent has promised to give me a sitting or two to get a sketch of her—that is if she has not departed in the meantime."

"Oh, Vere is not going for weeks—weeks," declared Mrs. Jock with great decision. "But tell me, George, why do you want the study? I mean, is it for a picture?"

"Certainly, for my 'Penelope.' I've been looking for a profile for ages."

"I see. Well, I can answer for it with fair cer-

tainty that she will be here when you come back on Thursday."

In half-an-hour he was gone. Jock and he drove to the station together, and presently the master of the house came back and betook himself unto his beloved fishing, where, indeed, Miss Nugent joined him, while Mrs. Jock worked her sweet will in the realms of fiction and fancy. So another lovely June day went over, and Mrs. Jock's busy brain worked more mischief.

"It's very flat without George, isn't it?" she remarked, casually, when she had put aside her pen for the day and had joined the pair on the edge of the largest of the ponds from which the place took its name. "Do you know, I think I shall ask Mrs. Hope and a man down for a few days. Mrs. Hope is a great friend of George's, and—let me see—I might have that young Mr. Demary—he seems a very nice boy. What do you think, Jock?"

"Oh, well, of course you know best," he replied, wondering the while what scheme she was up to now.

"Yes, I think I shall—a party of four *are* so dependent on each other—six are much more convenient. What do you think, Vere?"

"Oh, anything that pleases you will please me, Mrs. Jock," Vere said, simply.

Accordingly Mrs. Jock sent off a pressing invitation to Mrs. Hope and young Demary to come down to the Fish Ponds from Friday to Monday. "I know you will enjoy it, dear," she said to the lady, "when I tell you that George Lumley will be here, and I am asking young Mr. Demary also."

"That ought to bring her," her thoughts ran, and so in truth it did. By return of post came a gushing letter from Mrs. Hope, who was a widow of about Lumley's own age and a devoted friend of his, whom rumor declared would only too gladly exchange friendship for the sweet servitude of matrimony.

"Dearest Mrs. Jock, how awfully kind you are," the letter said, "*nobody* else would dream of giving one so much pleasure. *Indeed* I will come on Friday with the greatest delight. I have not forgotten my charming visit to the *dear* Fish Ponds last year, and I am simply *longing* to see you all again."

Mrs. Jock could not help smiling as she read the letter. After all, it was but a week since, that she had dined with Mrs. Hope at the Arlington and had taken her on to the theatre afterwards; she could scarcely be longing so very really to see her again, she thought.

"Oh! George, George, what a great deal your de-

lightful manner has to answer for," she said within herself. So when the Thursday came and the time for going to meet Lumley drew near, she told her husband that she thought he had better go. "I'd take the mare, dear," she said carelessly.

"Won't either of you come?" asked Jock, who was good-natured but not very far seeing.

"Oh! I don't think so, it's so cold to-night. You don't care about going, do you, Vere?"

"Not in the least," answered Vere, just as Mrs. Jock intended she should do; "indeed, I would much rather stay here."

"Then we will keep each other company," said the little woman to her husband; "you will be all right, you two, without us. Vere, my dear," she added, as her spouse departed, "suppose that we change our gowns now. Are you going to wear that pretty blue tea-gown to-night?"

"Yes, if you like. It is pretty, isn't it?" the girl replied.

So by the time that George Lumley, chilled and more than half disappointed that Vere had not gone to the station to meet him, walked into the drawing-room of the Fish Ponds, Mrs. Jock was already dressed for dinner, wearing a trailing tea-gown of rich gold plush which threw into fuller effect the

ruddy beauty of her hair and filled his artist's soul with joy.

"My dear George, I'm so glad you are back again ; it has been so flat without you," she exclaimed. "Ah ! here is Vere."

Lumley was almost startled by the girl, she looked so—so perfect in her long flowing gown of a quaint faded-looking blue stuff, touched here and there with gold embroidery and cut so as to show off to the utmost advantage the lovely lines of her throat and shoulders. If he had followed his inclination Lumley would assuredly have gone on his bended knee and kissed the gold-broidered hem of her garment. "You must wear that dress for our sitting, Miss Nugent," he said in a very earnest voice—"it is exactly, precisely the gown for my Penelope—form, color, everything."

"I will do that," she said, looking straight up into his eyes.

Oh ! she was so glad to see him again, in spite of all her cold dignity her pulses were beating, a new light shone in her beautiful eyes, of whose color even now the painter was scarcely sure—she had never been called handsome, but, to him, she was the perfection of loveliness.

Already he had forgotten his brief disappoint-

ment, already he was basking in her presence, he was charming and full of love for them all. It was like a welcome home. He had brought a great box of sweets for the children, he had a word for the maid who brought in the tea-tray, a pat for the dog and a tender hand with which to stroke the huge brindled Angora cat! In short, he was perfectly happy just to find himself where he was.

"And you got over the duchess's sittings?" Mrs Jock inquired.

"Oh, yes."

"Is the portrait finished?" she asked.

"It is, I'm glad to say."

"Does she like it—the duchess, I mean?"

"She says she does, immensely."

"Then you have flattered her," Mrs. Jock exclaimed.

Lumley laughed. "I always try to take ladies at their best, especially when they are no longer in their first youth," he said.

"Why," Mr. Jock cried, "the duchess is over fifty, if she is a day."

"I cannot say—she might be," the painter said blandly, then turned to Vere. "Do you know, Miss Nugent, your song about 'We Two,' has been ringing in my ears all the week. I wish you would sing it."

"Yes, do," said Mr. Jock, who felt that he had turned the conversation about the duchess's age with a bland firmness, which was almost a snub—"do sing it, Vere," and Vere sang—

Fate came between.
Our dream was o'er,
And forever and forever—we are two.

"By the bye, George," said Mrs. Jock, as the last faint chords died away into silence, "Mrs. Hope is coming to-morrow.

He turned his head sharply, the joy shining in his blue eyes had frozen into an expression of amazement and disgust.

"*Mrs. Jock!*" was all that he said.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. JOCK'S QUESTION!

"The fortunate man waits for peace, and the unlucky man takes a leap in the dark."

"MRS. JOCK," said Lumley an hour later as he held her hand at parting for the night—"please don't say anything, but I want you to do me a favor. I *must* get to Town early. Will it be possible for me to catch the eight o'clock train?"

"Oh, yes."

"It's rather early—but I wish you would drive me over yourself," he said wistfully.

"Of course I will. But George—you are coming down again?" anxiously.

"Oh yes, of course I am."

"When?"

"When? Saturday—will that suit you?"

"Perfectly. And we shall be alone, except for Vere," she said encouragingly.

The news of his departure was kept very quiet, so quiet that when Mrs. Hope made her appearance

in another smart tailorfrock, the big gray mare was tearing along the quiet country roads in the direction of the station.

"I say, Mrs. Jock," Lumley said, when they had fairly got out of sight of the Fish Ponds, "it's awfully sweet and kind of you to ask me to come down again, but I am not coming on Saturday, though I said I would last night in case anyone overheard me."

"You're not coming?" in the utmost dismay.

"Mrs. Jock," he said, not looking at her, but staring hard over the sweet flower-strewn hedgerows, "I can't come again while Miss Nugent is staying with you.

"But why? I—I thought you liked her so," the little woman exclaimed. She was so disturbed by the news that she jerked hard at the reins and the big mare who resented liberties of that kind was grievously offended and after romping about the road for a minute or two, tore away up a steep hill as if to express the extent of her displeasure. "George, has anything happened?" Mrs. Jock asked in a scared tone, when the offended steed had resumed a more reasonable pace.

"Miss Nugent definitely refused me last night," he said in an odd unmoved wooden kind of voice.

"But how—why—how did it happen?" Mrs. Jock cried. She was almost weeping in her disappointment and vexation.

"Oh! Mrs. Jock," he burst out—"why did you ask that woman down here? I was getting on splendidly until she and her broken-backed little Johnnie came."

Mrs. Jock was dismayed and bewildered. In a moment she knew what a complete failure she had made of the whole affair, that her first attempt at match-making was an absolute fiasco. Nay, she had done worse than that, she had the chagrin of knowing that in all probability, if she had not interfered at all but had quietly let events shape their own course, the marriage she so ardently desired would quietly have come about.

"George, I am very sorry," she said, winking hard to keep the tears out of her eyes—they were plainly to be heard in her trembling voice—"But, indeed I think there is quite a misunderstanding. I am sure Vere likes you—how could she help it?" she added, with unconscious flattery.

"Any way, she seemed very well able to do so," he answered grimly.

"But, George, I am sure I can put everything right for you: it must be a mistake, a misunderstanding—do let me try at least."

"Not for the whole world," he cried hastily. "My dear Mrs. Jock, I don't think I'm a stuck-up sort of chap, or that I ever give myself airs or anything of that kind, but I have a little pride, and I am far too proud to offer myself twice to the same woman. I wouldn't do it for a queen."

"But, George, if it was my fault you might at least give me the satisfaction of trying to put it right——"

"Dear Mrs. Jock, please say no more about it," he said imploringly.

"Won't you come down on Saturday if I write, and tell you she wants you to come?"

"Miss Nugent will not tell you that," he replied.

"But if she does?"

"No"—shaking his head—"it is no use. I wouldn't ask her to marry me again if you told me she was breaking her heart for me. I believe in a lady knowing her own mind when a man offers her all that he has and is and ever will be."

"But if she were to ask you?" Mrs. Jock ventured to say, in a very small and doubtful voice, "what then?"

But Lumley only burst out into a scornful laugh. "Oh, Mrs. Jock, you can be very, very foolish sometimes, and here is the station. Think no more of it.

I hope you will be merciful enough never to mention the subject to me again. Good-bye—many thanks for all your kindness and your hospitality. Goodbye.”

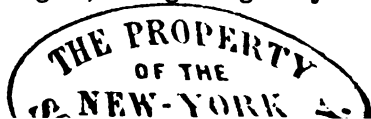
In two minutes he was gone, and Mrs. Jock turned the mare round and let her take her own pace home again, a smart rattling pace it was too, so that she was at home again before any of her visitors had missed her. It was wonderful how eager Mrs. Hope and her boy were to get away from the delights of the country when they found that Mr. Lumley had gone.

“There’s a train at ten, isn’t there, dear? Yes. Well, I *must* go up by that. I have my trustee coming to lunch at half-past one. Of course *most* important to me. Do you go by that train, Hughie?” addressing the boy.

“Ya’as—’fraid I must. Got to meet my trustee too.”

He was not clever enough to invent an excuse of his own, so borrowed hers with the most unblushing effrontery. “Awf’ly sorry—hope I shall meet you in Town sometime, Miss Nugent. Delighted to put you up to the most *chic* dress-woman in London. What!”

“I’ll be sure to let you know when I come up,” said Miss Nugent, with great gravity.



Mrs. Jock looked at her sharply. She was deathly pale, and the great rings round her eyes betokened a sleepless night, and Mrs. Jock fancied many tears. The little woman was angry with her and sorry for her at the same time, while as for herself—why, she could willingly have taken herself by the neck and shaken herself well, had such a proceeding been possible.

“Good-bye, dearest Ruth,” Mrs. Hope said, half an hour later, as Mrs. Jock stood on the steps watching her mount into the stanhope. “We shall all miss you dreadfully in Town, but I don’t wonder you prefer the dear Fish Ponds. Had a lovely time—I hate having to go. Good-bye, darling—good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Gwen—be good,” was Mrs. Jock’s parting salutation, “Good-bye, Mr. Damery—be sure you look after her well.”

She watched them till they were out of sight, and then she went back into the house. The servants were busy clearing the breakfast table. She saw the tail of Vere’s blue serge gown disappear into the drawing-room. Mrs. Jock went after her and shut the door. “Vere,” she said abruptly, “why did you refuse George Lumley?”

CHAPTER X.

UNCERTAINTY.

"I not only speak so that I can be understood, but so that I cannot be misunderstood!"

WHEN MRS. JOCK put that question plump and plain to Vere Nugent, the girl had no loop-hole of escape.

"I—who told you anything about it?" she asked, almost defiantly.

"He did," answered Mrs. Jock promptly.

"Mr. Lumley told you that I refused him?" she repeated incredulously.

"He did"

"In plain words?"

"In these very words—'Miss Nugent definitely refused me last night,' that was exactly what he said. And, oh! Vere, my dear, I am so disappointed," the little woman cried, the tears rushing into her eyes. "And I feel as if it was all my fault for having asked Mrs. Hope down. I thought to make it

easier for you both—yes, I did, and instead of doing that I've ruined everything—everything."

"But Mr. Lumley never asked me to marry him," the girl stammered. "He said something about the sitting for his Penelope, and then—he—he said something very vague and uncertain about his wishes, and all that, and—and—I knew he was one of the greatest flirts in London, and—and—I cut him short that was all. But he never asked me to marry him, Mrs. Jock, I swear to you."

"Oh! you silly girl," Mrs. Jock almost screamed, "as if any man goes down on his knees and offers his hand and his heart formally now a days. And you've sent him away—wretched—wretched."

"I am wretched, too," Vere burst out indignantly.

"So you ought to be, so you deserve to be," Mrs. Jock retorted, passionately. "And then you say he's a flirt. Who told you that? Not I! He can't help half the women in London being in love with him; he can't help being the most charming delightful man in the world. But a flirt he never was. I've known him for years—years. I never saw dear old George flirt yet, though I've seen dozens of women trying hard to flirt with him. And you've broken his heart, sent him away wretched and miserable,

and I wish I'd never asked you to come down here at all or him either,—yes, I do."

It was not often that Mrs. Jock worked herself up into a regular passion, though she could, as Jock could have borne witness; on that particular occasion, however, she was in a boiling passion and what the end of it all would have been I really cannot say, had not Vere created a diversion by suddenly flinging herself down upon the nearest sofa in a positive agony of reproachful grief.

For a moment or so Mrs. Jock was startled in to silence, then her kindness reasserted itself and she sat down and drew the sobbing girl to her heart.

"There—there, dear. I was horrid and unkind and a perfect beast to you," she cried. "Don't cry like that, darling, pray don't—I never mean half I say when I'm in a rage, as Jock would tell you. It was only that I'm so fond of dear old George and I couldn't bear to think he should be made unhappy for no real reason, for you do like him, don't you, Vere? Oh, my dear, you don't know how dear and kind and good he is—you'd never think he was a genius if there weren't all his lovely pictures hung on the line every year to prove it. And he had never asked anyone else before Vere, for he told me so—"

"And he will never ask me again," sobbed Vere, in a piteous strangled voice.

"Well, so he said," said Mrs. Jock, reflectively—"but then men say a great many things that they don't stick to, you know, dearie. And why not, dear old George, as well as any other man, eh? And you do really like him, Vere?"

Vere, however, had nothing definite to say on this subject, but she cried a great deal and Mrs. Jock gathered that she was just as heart-broken for love of George Lumley as George Lumley was heart-broken for love of her.

And he had positively vowed that he would never ask her to marry him again!

She knew Lumley very well, far more intimately than any of the other women who boasted more of his friendship for them, and she had an uncomfortable feeling down at the bottom of her heart that having once said he would never ask Vere again, he would resolutely keep to his word, even if doing it cost him the happiness of his whole life.

However, she soothed and comforted the girl as best as she could, telling her not to grieve, that it would all come right in the end, that when the first soreness of his feeling had worn off, Lumley would assuredly be impelled to see her again.

"And I'll write to him and see if I can't just hint that he might have been mistaken," she ended, when Vere sat up and fixed her with her wonderful eyes.

"You'll not tell him that I have been crying my eyes out for an hour past, will you, Mrs. Jock?" she cried eagerly.

"No—no, dear, I'll not give you away—take my word for it," soothingly.

But, all the same, she did give the girl away as completely as pen and ink were capable of doing it.

"My dear old George," she wrote. "I knew I was right all the time. The poor child hadn't the smallest idea that you were serious, and simply cut you short because she fancied you were only amusing yourself idly with her. She is simply heart-broken to think that, without knowing it, she actually refused you, and she is as much in love with you as even *you* could wish. I feel myself very very much to blame in having asked Gwen Hope down here at all. I *never* thought she would go on in that perfectly ridiculous way—at *her* age, too. Of course, my dearest old George, I know you vowed all sorts of things for the future on our way to the station, but if only for my sake I do hope you will reconsider them and come down here the very first hour you can. Half-an-hour's notice by telegram will do for

me, and I shall neither be able to sleep, eat, **work**, nor rest until I hear from you that it is all right.—
Your distressed friend,

“RUTH AIRLIE.”

“There, surely *that* ought to bring him along,” she said aloud, when she had read this effusion over. “And heaven forgive me! I promised that poor child I wouldn’t give her away. Well, after all it’s in a good cause, and I don’t see why a little foolish pride on either side should be the ruin of two loving hearts.”

She felt easier when the letter was actually gone, though she was greatly troubled in her mind in thinking of what Lumley would do. She knew him so well, and she was dreadfully afraid. And yet surely, surely, he would never be so silly as to sacrifice his life’s happiness for the sake of something he had said in the soreness of knowing that he had been rejected.

The next day came and went by—such a long, long day. Jock Airle spent most of it in fishing, and Mrs. Jock wandered restlessly about the place, going in and out like the proverbial dog in a fair. She was like a being possessed. She could not rest or settle to anything, and indeed she spent more time

at the gate at the end of the long drive watching for a telegram from East Court than at any other time she would have believed possible. But there was no telegram from Lumley, and at last the long day came to an end and they went to bed once more.

"There will be a letter to-morrow," said Mrs. Jock confidently.

But the morrow came and there was no letter. "I wonder why he has not written—it's not like him," the little woman cried impatiently to her lord.

"In a devil of a wax, I should think," said Jock wisely. "He can be, you know."

"But he never has been with me," she said dolefully.

"You never managed to make a complete hash of his love-affairs before," Jock rejoined.

Mrs. Jock flared up instantly. "Jock, you really are horrid," she cried almost in tears again. "I never knew anyone, never, who could say the horrid blunt brutally truthful things that you can. And I do think it unkind of you when you know I'm wretched and miserable about it."

"Poor little woman, I wouldn't worry myself if I were you," Jock returned easily. "Old George will

have himself to blame if he doesn't come back. If he really wants the girl, you bet he will too—be an awful ass if he doesn't!"

"You are so unsympathetic!" Mrs. Jock cried, stamping her foot in her distress.

Jock could not help laughing.

"My sweet little soul, I'll be sympathetic enough if you'll tell me how to be," he said soothingly. "I think you're all making a great fuss over nothing. You could hardly have heard from George yet."

"Hardly have heard! Why, I wrote on Monday and sent the letter up by the afternoon train," she cried. "I ought to have had a telegram first thing on Tuesday morning, and here it is Wednesday afternoon and I've not had the very smallest sign. I think it's horrid and exceedingly rude to me!"

"So it is, my dear. I should slate him well when you do get speech of him again."

But Lumley did not seem inclined to let any of them get speech of him again. Thursday morning came, but the post brought no letter from him, and Mrs. Jock got more and more wretched and Vere Nugent's pale face grew paler and paler, and the black rings round her eyes darker and darker.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Jock Airlie an hour or so after breakfast—"I'll run up to Town

and see old George and talk the sulky old bear into reason and bring him down with me to dinner."

Mrs. Jock jumped up and flung her arms around her lord's neck. "Oh! you old darling, I do love you," she cried—"you always do think of the right thing to say and do when one is at one's wit's end. Now I shall have my mind put at rest—and I assure you, Jock, I've been nearly out of it the last few days."

"I believe you," returned Jock quietly. "Then look here, you'd better not tell Vere that I'm going to Town at all—eh? I'll wire to you to say what time you can meet me, and whether I'm coming alone or not."

"But you are not to come alone," imperatively.

"Not if I can help it, of course not, but if Lumley's dining out to-night he cannot throw a lady over."

"Oh! no—no."

"You'll drive me over with the pony, eh?"

"Of course I will."

"I wonder," laughingly, "whether you'll be able to keep my whereabouts a secret all day?"

"Why, yes, of course, I shall."

And so she did! With a light excuse to Vere for not taking her, she got into the smart little trap and drove her husband away from the house. And all

the way along she never ceased giving him instructions as to the course he had better take if George was obstinate and would not listen to reason.

"Leave it to me, little woman," he suggested when at last they came within sight of the station. "There's nothing like acting on the spur of the moment, and I don't want to be fogged by a hundred and one instructions that I shall not half remember. You just leave it to me and go quietly home and eat a good lunch and make Vere do the same. I'll do the best I can, you may rely on that."

"Yes, I know you will, dear Jock. Good luck go with you," she returned.

She waited to see the train go ahead and to wave Jock a final adieu as it passed, and then she turned the pony's head towards home. The pony was a lazy little beast, sturdy as only a Welsh pony ever is, and fat as a pig. He stopped two or three times to take a snack by the wayside and had got several mouthfuls before his absent-minded little mistress realized the position of affairs, and sent him bustling along on his legitimate business with but scant mercy.

"Oh, dear, dear, I do wonder what luck Jock will have," she mused, as the fat little pony hustled along.

Meantime, Vere Nugent was sitting in the big rustic chair which stood in Jock Airlie's favorite spot for watching his float, and was looking with sad tear-dimmed eyes over the dark placid waters of the lake.

She was very very unhappy! She was more hopelessly in love with Lumley than ever, the very thought of him was enough to make the blood dance in her veins, to make her heart alternately beat hard and fast or stand still until you might fancy it never would go on any more. What a fool she had been, she told herself. How she had misjudged him! She had let the jealous words of a vain and worldly woman come in between her and her life's happiness. She was sure that he would never come back—was it likely that he would? That he—accustomed to be courted and made much of by every one, should come humbly to the girl who had coldly repulsed him and would not even listen to the great honor that he would have offered her! Oh! what a fool, what a fool she had been, and yet how thrice wretched in having missed the happiness which had been so nearly hers.

"How was I to know that he—he—would ever really care for me?" she cried aloud to the dark waters. "What could there be in me to attract him? And yet, I might have trusted him—I might have known

—I might have staked my very life on his truth, on his honor. Oh! Vere Nugent, you wretched, wretched girl, you have no one to blame except your own doubting self.”

She went in when the bell rang for luncheon and made a pretence of sharing the meal, although she did not eat three mouthfuls.

“Do try to eat, dear child,” said Mrs. Jock looking at her with great eyes full of self-reproach.

“I am not often hungry at this time, Mrs. Jock,” she answered in a brave attempt to hide her woe.

“But you had no breakfast to speak of, and no dinner; you haven’t been hungry for a week,” Mrs. Jock said.

“Perhaps I shall be hungry by dinner-time,” Vere suggested.

She took a book out on to the lawn, and spent the next two hours watching Mrs. Jock play tennis with Nita and Frankie, and though she did not know it Mrs. Jock was keeping a very vigilant eye upon the drive, so that if a telegram came from East Court she should be ready to pounce upon it without a moment’s delay. And then I think out of sheer weariness Vere Nugent fell asleep, and only woke up to see Mrs. Jock running towards her with an orange envelope and a sheet of pinkish paper fluttering in her hand.

CHAPTER XI.

NEWS !

"'Tis the sun that brings the cloud,
Shadows of the light are born."

"**VERE**, Vere," Mrs. Jock cried breathlessly, "I knew it was all right—I knew my dear old George wouldn't—couldn't be so horrid as to sulk or any thing like that. I knew it would be all right in the end."

"Is he coming?" Vere asked. She had grown very white and her lips were trembling, as were her hands.

"Coming, no, poor dear, it will be long enough before he goes anywhere. But Jock went up—I was so uneasy, and he wires to say—" and she tried to smoothe the bit of fluttering paper out, which, as a brisk breeze was blowing, she found very difficult—"See, this is what Jock says: 'Found George in bed, had bad accident, letter unopened. Come up to Town at once and bring Vere with you.' So you see, dear child, it was all right after all."

Vere looked at her with profound dismay. "Where is it all right, I'd like to know?" she cried. "He is lying with a broken leg or head or something, too ill even to open your letter—and you call it all right. I don't see how matters could be very much more all wrong. And when he does come to himself I don't suppose he will be any more forgiving towards me," she ended with a sob in her throat.

Mrs. Jock laughed, although it was not a very real-sounding laugh, and there was a suspicious brightness about her eyes. "It won't help matters for you and me to stay wrangling here, dear—we have to catch the train at six o'clock. Jock is sure to meet us with the latest news."

But he did not do so. On the contrary, when the train ran into Liverpool Street Station there was not a sign of Mr. Airlie, and the hearts of the two women sank as they realized the fact.

"Oh! but there is Blackwood," Mrs. Jock exclaimed suddenly in a tone of relief. "Blackwood is George's own man—evidently Jock did not like leaving him. Here we are, Blackwood," she called out, "I suppose you have come to meet us."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied; "Mr. Airlie did not like to leave my master."

"And how is he? What was wrong—what was the accident?" Mrs. Jock asked, eagerly.

"A cab accident, ma'am. My master was knocked down in trying to save a child from being run over."

"And much hurt?" anxiously.

"Very seriously hurt, ma'am—concussion of the brain. Mr. Lumley has not known anyone until this afternoon."

"Was Mr. Airlie with him then?"

"Yes, ma'am—and I think he was barely conscious when I came away. I have the brougham here, ma'am, if you will show me your luggage. And dinner will be ready by the time you get there."

"Very well—we have our luggage in the carriage with us—just these things. Yes—that is all."

In a few minutes they were comfortably installed in Lumley's cosy brougham. "Blackwood," said Mrs. Jock, "don't you think we had better send these things off to South Kensington Square in a cab? What's the good of dragging them all up to St. John's Wood?"

"Mrs. Pratt has made two bedrooms ready, ma'am," Blackwood replied. "Mr. Airlie thought it would be best for you to remain at the studio, as you would probably be going back to the Fish Ponds in a few days."

"Oh, in that case it is all right," she said, and

then Blackwood shut the door and the carriage rolled on.

But Vere Nugent caught hold of Mrs. Jock's arm in a very agitated kind of way. "Mrs. Jock," she said in a shaking voice, "you forget—I can't go and stay in Mr. Lumley's house."

"But why?" Mrs. Jock asked mildly, turning her radiant face on the girl. "You will be with me—nobody can say a word. We are George Lumley's greatest friends."

"Oh, I'm not thinking of what people will say," said Miss Nugent in fine scorn, "I never trouble myself very much about that. It is what Mr. Lumley himself will think. Supposing that he doesn't want to——"

"To forgive you after all?" the little woman ended for her. "Oh, my dear child, I think you may safely trust my Jock; he's no fool—he knows. I'm quite sure he had some special reason for arranging that we should stay at the Studio—at all events, wait until we have seen Jock. If you would rather not stay then, you shall go down to South Kensington Square then."

With which, of course, the girl had to be content. They drove along almost in silence, Mrs. Jock tired and rather sleepy, Vere painfully wide-awake and anx-

ious and at last they turned into the pleasant tree-shaded road in which the Studio, as Lumley's house was called, was situated, and in a couple of minutes later had turned in at the gates and driven up to the house.

It all seemed strangely quiet and deserted. Vere walked in conscious that the entrance-hall was large and softly carpeted, and hung with many pictures and trophies of various kinds. A large jewelled lamp hung overhead, shedding a soft light around, and a big St. Bernard dog lay asleep on the hearth, filled with palms and greenery now.

He rose in a very majestic way and came to meet them, greeting Vere first by thrusting a cold nose into her hand and hunching his large person heavily against her. Then Jock Airlie came hurriedly down the stairs saying, "I'm so glad you've both come. This is a terribly bad business. I'm afraid the dear old chap's in a very bad way."

"Mr. Lumley is not worse I hope, sir," put in Blackwood anxiously, and the two women hung upon his words like anxious prisoners might do on a verdict of life or death.

"Very bad the last hour, Blackwood," Airlie answered, shaking his head thoughtfully. "I thought about five o'clock when he seemed quiet and knew

me that the worst was over. However, the doctor is with him now and we must only hope for the best."

"Is he conscious?" Mrs. Jock asked.

"Yes, conscious, but off his head completely—awfully delirious."

They had gone into the drawing-room by that time, and Blackwood had disappeared. "Jock," said Mrs. Jock, wistfully, "did—did he mention Vere when he knew you this afternoon?"

"Well—I did."

"Yes; oh, *don't* keep us in suspense," the little woman cried. "Don't you see that she is half mad with anxiety, and I too? What did you say?"

"Well, of course they told me how very serious it was," he answered. "Blackwood, in fact, was in the very act of writing a telegram to me. I went in and spoke to him, and I suppose the voice or something roused him for he knew me at once. 'Don't go away,' he said feebly, 'I'm about done for.' I said, 'Nothing of the kind, old chap. You've had a bad knock over, but we'll have you about again in no time. I'm going to send down for Ruth to come up to help to nurse you.' 'Yes, do,' he said; 'and——' 'And Vere?' I asked, thinking he might mean that. 'I don't think she will,' he said, shut-

ting his eyes again. I patted his hand, and said, 'You keep yourself quite, old chap, and don't worry about Vere. You made a bit of a mistake, or she did. Anyway I happen to know that she'll come like a bird, and that seemed to satisfy him. So I wired off for you both at once. Why, my dear girl,' he broke off, "you're not vexed about it surely?" for Vere had hidden her face and was weeping bitterly.

"No—no, not at all. You go away a bit. She'll be all right. She's a little overwrought," interposed Mrs. Jock hastily. "She'll be all right in five minutes if she's not worried. I'll take her upstairs presently."

Vere was soon soothed into quietness again, and then Mrs. Jock took her up to the pretty room which the housekeeper had prepared next to Mrs. Jock's own.

"It's an odd fancy for a bachelor to have a big place like this all to himself," Mrs. Jock said, as she helped Vere to lay her things away; "but the fact was when Fergus the R. A. died, his wife having died only three months before him, George bought the whole place as it stood from the trustees or executors, whichever it was. Fergus's only daughter was married and away in India and could not come

home for five years, so she told them to sell the whole place just as it stood. And George hated lodgings or chambers always."

"It is a charming house," said Vere.

Mrs. Jock took her hand. "I'm glad you think so, dear," she said kindly, "because you know it will be yours some day."

"If—if——"

"Oh, my dear, poor old darling, he has forgotten all his disappointment long ago," Mrs. Jock cried, "it will be all right, as right as right can be, if all goes well."

"But if it does not go well," the girl breathed scarcely above a whisper.

"We won't think of that," resolutely. "He is in good hands. We shall all do our best for him, and God is above us all the time, Vere, all the time."

It seemed almost impossible to the overwrought and anxious girl, to sit down and eat a meal—her first meal in Lumley's house—while he was fighting a fierce battle with the King of Terrors overhead. Mrs. Jock, however, explained matters so fully and with such terrible plainness, that the poor child had no choice but to put aside all thoughts of her own likes and dislikes and do simply and precisely what she was told to do.

"We don't know what kind of a time we may have before us," Mrs. Jock said, gravely. "Of course he is very ill and we may have a long struggle to pull him through. So it is no time to think of what we like and don't like, and the very best way by which you can show that you really do care for him, dear child, is by doing everything you can to keep yourself strong and well and of some service to him. I know it must be dreadful to you to be here for the very first time like this, but I want you to try and make a good dinner nevertheless. Physically, you must need it badly."

"That is just what I don't feel," said Vere meekly.

"Because you have got past it," returned Mrs. Jock. "I shall get Blackwood to give you a glass of George's best Burgundy at once."

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW.

"I can smile, and murder while I smile ;
And cry content to that which grieves my heart ;
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears ;
And frame my face to all occasions."

AND after this Lumley was desperately ill. For many days the doctors came and went, two fresh nurses arrived, and Mrs. Jock was almost beside herself with anxiety and fear. She and Jock certainly stuck to their friend bravely. They never left him—day and night one or other of them was always with him, seeing that everything that could be done for him was done. And Vere—well, poor girl, she, wretched and almost dead with anxiety and want of sleep, spent the long and weary days wandering in and out of the rooms with no reasonable and legitimate occupation excepting the answers of notes and telegrams, which came in by shoals from morning till night. She too saw a good many people who called to enquire for him

and insisted upon seeing someone not quite a servant. She was generally believed to be his amanuensis, and people—ladies especially—wondered that the painter should have so young a lady in that capacity. Mrs. Hope, too, came duly and truly, and at last when Vere had been there three days, Blackwood, weary of her importunity for information, told her that Mr. and Mrs. Airlie had been staying in the house for several days, and that perhaps Mrs. Airlie would see her.

“Oh! in *that* case,” said the lady with renewed interest, “I will come in. Mrs. Airlie is sure to come down to see me. I’m so very anxious about Mr. Lumley.”

Now it happened that if the faithful and intelligent Blackwood had a hatred and a loathing for any human being on earth that person was Mrs. Hope. He knew, nobody better, that Mrs. Hope had every intention, if such a thing were possible, of becoming mistress of the lovely house in St. John’s Wood, and Blackwood had a not unreasonable desire that such an event should not come about. He had no objection to his master’s being married—indeed I think, on the whole, Blackwood preferred a married master to a single one as that did away with the necessity of a housekeeper, a

class of person for whom he had no love—but the idea of his master as the husband of Mrs. Hope was to Blackwood tantamount to the certainty of his having to look out for another billet. He therefore ushered the lady into the little morning-room where Miss Nugent was sitting, and betook himself away to institute enquiries of the authorities above.

“Miss Nugent,” exclaimed Mrs. Hope in credulous tones—“*you—here!*”

Miss Nugent got up and held out her hand. “How do you do?” she said quietly.

“I am very much surprised,” replied the lady promptly, “I never was more surprised in my life. I understood from Blackwood that Mr. and Mrs. Airlie were staying here.”

She spoke in a tone and with a significance which sent the blood rushing into the girl’s pale face. “Mr. and Mrs. Airlie are staying here,” she replied, with quiet civility.

“Oh! really—well, it is as well! Where is Ruth? I will go to her at once.”

“I don’t think you had better do that,” said Vere very firmly—“because she is sitting with Mr. Lumley.”

“Well”—and Mrs. Hope drew herself up and looked at the girl as if to say that there was no

reason why she should not go to Mrs. Jock nevertheless.

"I don't think," said Vere, patiently, "that you quite understand how very ill, dangerously ill, Mr. Lumley is. No one is allowed to see him at all—indeed, he would probably not know you if you did see him."

Mrs. Hope became suddenly dignified.

"My dear Miss Nugent," she said, "you don't seem to understand the terms upon which Mr. Lumley and I are."

"No? I don't," returned Vere simply.

"If anybody can be allowed to see him, surely I am that person," Mrs. Hope continued.

"I don't think so," said Vere, who scarcely understood her.

"No. Then—but no, it is not necessary that I should explain myself to you. I will make it very clear to Mrs. Airlie when she comes down. Oh! here is Blackwood. Well?"

"I'm afraid I cannot disturb Mrs. Airlie, ma'am," the servant said quietly; "she has been sitting by Mr. Lumley's bed since early morning, and has just fallen asleep in the dressing-room. The nurse in charge is particularly anxious that she should not be disturbed and wished me to tell you that an hour

ago the doctors thought my master's condition a little more favorable. They have decidedly better hopes than they had yesterday at the same time."

"Oh! well, I am glad of that. Is your master conscious?"

"Yes, ma'am, but very weak as yet."

"I am sure he would like to see me," Mrs. Hope declared.

"I am afraid that's impossible, ma'am," said the servant firmly.

"Not impossible at all. Show me the way upstairs," Mrs. Hope said imperatively.

Blackwood, however, did not move. "I cannot do that, ma'am," he said with imperturbable good nature mingled with much firmness, "it would be as much as my master's life was worth."

"Nonsense!" cried Mrs. Hope angrily.

"Besides, ma'am, if I were to take you up, the the nurse would not let you go into the room, that is certain."

"How preposterous!" she exclaimed. "Why, by whose orders would she prevent me?"

"Well, ma'am, in case of severe illness doctors and nurses don't wait for orders, they act on their

"You—you—Blackwood, do you know that you are extremely insolent to me?"

"I think not, ma'am. I should be very sorry to be anything but respectful to a friend of my master's, but I cannot let you go upstairs, and the nurses won't allow me to disturb Mrs. Airlie, so what am I to do?"

"Mrs. Hope, don't you think I had better tell Mrs. Jock to write to you, when she does awake?"

"No, certainly not—thousand thanks. I will wait here until she is awake," and Mrs. Hope sat down in the cosiest chair with a determined air such as made Blackwood long to take her by the shoulders and put her right out of the house.

"Very good, ma'am," returned the man, with outward civility, and retired to think out some plan by which he could succeed in ousting the unwelcome intruder. As a matter of fact he went up to Airlie's room and ruthlessly roused him from a deep and refreshing sleep.

"Eh? What? Anything the matter, Blackwood? Is he worse?" Airlie cried struggling up into a sitting position.

"No, sir, don't be alarmed," said Blackwood soothingly. "It's only"—with a deprecating air—

"Mrs. Hope, sir. She is downstairs, and I think she's come to stop," with a sniff of disgust.

"Come to stop! Good heavens, but she can't stop here. Good heavens, you must get her out of this, Blackwood! You must indeed."

"But I can't, sir," cried Blackwood with a groan, "she won't go. I can't put her out, can I?"

"Why don't you send Mrs. Airlie down to her?"

"Mrs. Airlie has fallen asleep in the dressing-room, sir, and the nurse won't have her roused."

"Of course not—it's not likely," with a sigh that was almost a groan. "Where is she?"

"In the morning-room with Miss Nugent, sir," Blackwood replied.

"Oh dear, dear. Well, I suppose there is nothing for it but my getting up and—— Well, anyway, she can't stop here, it's out of the question."

Mrs. Hope meantime had unbent a little towards Vere, and had indeed become quite confidential. Vere, who was busy answering notes of enquiry went on steadily with her work replying to Mrs. Hope's various remarks in the fewest possible words.

"I do so often wonder that George has kept such a very unsuitable and insolent servant about him so long"—Mrs. Hope remarked presently. "I do think

it's such a mistake. Of course I can quite understand his exceptional rudeness to me."

"We haven't found Blackwood rude at all," said Vere, simply—"he is dreadfully anxious about his master, of course, and you know if he were to allow anyone who chose to go upstairs he would be severely blamed for it by everybody."

"Oh! yes, anyone who chose—but I don't quite come under the heading of 'anyone' in this house, my dear young lady. I don't think you quite understand the position of affairs."

"I don't," answered Vere, looking up from her note.

"No, nor does Blackwood apparently. He will understand better when he finds that he has to look out for another situation."

"I don't think he will have to do that," said Vere coldly.

"No—ah! well, we shall see," smiling disagreeably.

"Mrs. Hope," said Vere, with an effort, and looking her enemy—she felt that this woman was her enemy, by a sure unerring instinct—straight in the eyes, "you have implied a good many things during the last ten minutes. May I ask you a plain question and will you give me a straightforward answer?"

"Certainly."

"Do you wish me to understand that you are engaged to Mr. Lumley?"

"If you have no objection," said Mrs. Hope, triumphantly.

"My objection, if I have one, has nothing to do with the fact. I asked you a question and you promised to give me a straightforward answer."

"Then, I do most decidedly wish you to understand that," said Mrs. Hope promptly.

"I see. I think if I were you I would tell Blackwood that. He would understand then that you are not to be treated like an ordinary caller. Will you excuse me if I leave you? I must send off these notes at once."

"Oh! certainly—certainly;" Mrs. Hope said, smiling still.

She smiled after Vere had left the room, and got up that she might the better see herself in the glass above the chimney-shelf.

"Oh! Mr. Airlie," she cried, a few minutes later when Jock came in, "do let me see him."

"My dear Mrs. Hope," Jock replied; "I couldn't. Why, even Miss Nugent has not been allowed even to look into the room yet."

CHAPTER XIII.

A TURN FOR THE BETTER.

"To morrow!
It is a period nowhere to be found
In all the hoary registers of Time."

IN less time than it takes me to write these words a complete realization of the awful truth had formed itself in Vere Nugent's brain. She carried her letters out into the hall, where she found Blackwood dawdling about so as to be ready when Mrs. Hope should require showing to her carriage. He came forward when he saw her.

"For post, ma'am?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, putting them into his hands. Then looked at him with her wonderful eyes—"Blackwood," she said, "I'm afraid you made rather a mistake just now."

"I hope not, Miss Nugent," he replied. "I would be very sorry to be rude to a lady."

"Oh! I did not mean that you were rude," she said, wearily; "not that. But Mrs. Hope is naturally very anxious about Mr. Lumley, and—oh!

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here is Mr. Airlie. I am going upstairs, if you want anything, Blackwood," with a sudden change of tone.

"Yes, ma'am," said Blackwood, in his usual manner.

But when Mr. Jock Airlie had opened the door of the morning-room and had gone in, Blackwood stood turning the letters over and wondering what she had meant by saying that he had made a mistake in what he had said to Mrs. Hope.

"Never meant that he was going to marry the old girl," he muttered—and surely the fashionable Mrs. Hope, who coquettishly owned to being thirty-one, would have had a fit if she had known his thoughts. "Oh, no; couldn't be that. But I wonder what she did mean? I wonder how long Mr. Airlie'll take to choke her off."

Jock Airlie did not take very long, however, to Blackwood's no small satisfaction. Jock Airlie did not much care about Mrs. Hope, although she was by way of being an intimate of his wife. And somehow in his large and solid presence Mrs. Hope always felt more or less hopeless, and as if her stock-in-trade of looks and coquetry were all decidedly impotent.

She often wondered that dear little Ruth Airlie,

with her bright vivacious ways, her big generous heart, and her dainty delicate fancies, had ever allowed herself to be cajoled into marrying that exceedingly heavy and unattractive Jock; and indeed Mrs. Hope's opinion was well known on the subject. That afternoon Mrs. Hope's opinions became more pronounced than ever.

"Why, even Miss Nugent has not been allowed to look into the room yet," he said, bluntly. "You know the poor old chap has had the very nearest shave in the whole world—in fact, we can scarcely say that he's out of the wood yet. Ruth is simply worn out and dead asleep at this moment, and I'm not much better."

"But surely I could be of some use?" she pleaded.

"Well, candidly, I don't think you could," he said, bluntly, "and, of course, every extra one in the house makes it harder to keep going. But it's awfully kind of you to have come; I'll let him know as soon as he's fit to hear of outside interests. By the bye, are you driving, or shall I call you a cab?"

"Oh, no; I'm driving, thanks," she replied.

She was boiling over with passion as she crossed the hall and went down the steps to her carriage.

Blackwood, still on the alert, preceded her down the steps and guarded her dress, putting the smart white wrapper neatly over her knees with as much care as if she been his own mistress.

"Good-bye—good-bye," said Jock, cheerfully. "I'll be sure to let him know."

"You beast," she muttered under her breath, as she waved a smiling adieu to him.

"H'm," ejaculated Jock, as the carriage turned through the gates. "I'm afraid you don't love me as well you did an hour ago, my dear friend. H'm—a pretty kettle of fish if I'd let you go gallivanting up to poor Lumley's bedside."

"Concussion of the brain is best kept quiet, sir," remarked Blackwood very solemnly and in a very precise and wooden kind of voice, at which Jock Air-lie burst out laughing and went indoors feeling that he had achieved a very complete, though a quiet victory.

And poor Vere, who had gone slowly and drearily up to her room face to face with a new and terrible trouble even before the weight of the first awful one had lifted from her heart. Could it really be true that he had gone straightway and engaged himself to Mrs. Hope of all women in the world? If so he must have gone to her and asked her at once

on arriving in London, at least during the course of that day.

From Blackwood they had learned that Mr. Lumley had returned about three o'clock, having sent his luggage up to the studio in a cab three hours earlier, that he had dressed and gone out, telling Blackwood that he might possibly not return till late at night.

"I have to see a lady in Queen's Gate about a sitting," he said, "and if I'm coming home to dinner, I'll send you a wire about half-past six."

He had, however, been brought home about six o'clock in a cab by a policeman and a strange gentleman, who told Blackwood of the accident, and that the only conscious words he had spoken were—"Take me home—not a hospital—home," and accordingly they had done so.

She remembered now so well Mrs. Jock's comment on hearing Blackwood's story—"Ah, I wonder if he had been to see Mrs. Hope. She lives in Queen's Gate, you know."

Well, it was evident that he had been there, and from what Mrs. Hope had said, it was equally evident that he had gone there in anger or despair and had asked her to take possession of the heart which he believed that she, Vere, had rejected! But oh—no, no, not the heart; of the life, the name, the fate, if

you will, but the heart was hers—all hers even yet. Had he not asked for her in his first conscious moment, had he not wished for her presence? Ah! yes, whatever happened in the time to come, she was sure that his heart was and would be hers forever!

And oh! how unutterably wretched she was! She had no tears left! Her anxiety, her sleeplessness, her grief at the mistakes of the past had taken all her tears—in this the most crushing blow of all, her eyes were quite dry, but her heart seemed like a lump of lead. Her future looked black and blank, her flower of hope was withered and dead.

For a long time she sat at the open window looking out upon the well-kept garden with eyes that saw none of the beauties of smooth turf, wisteria bloom, trim ivy, blue forget-me-nots, and red geraniums dotted here and there. She heard nothing of the strains of little happy birds which fluttered in and out of their nests under the wide eaves of the pretty house. No, she had only one dreadful thought ringing in her brain, and the refrain of a song which was torture most exquisite to her.

“Fate came between,
Our dream was o’er,
And forever—and forever—we are two.”

And oh, could it ever be that he and that woman, that painted, soulless, heartless doll should be one?

She fell to wondering in a dull and dreary way whether the lie was his or hers about the little foot, and the hand and arm and the nose in profile and the full length portrait that he had painted of her. What was it he had said, "Whose foot and hand and arm and nose are you talking about? Not hers Mrs. Hope didn't tell you that, did she? Oh, well, of course I cannot put my word against a lady's—I didn't know it, that's all."

Yes, that was what he had said! And it had sounded so real, so true, that she had doubted him no more, although he had not actually denied the assertion that Mrs. Hope had served as his model more than once. Well, it was too late to undo the past now. He had asked her to marry him, or would have done if she had let him speak, and she had refused. She had refused and he had gone straightway and tied himself in honor to another—nothing could alter that now, nothing.

She was still there when a light knock sounded on the door. "Come in," she said, when it sounded a second time.

The door was opened a couple of inches. "Vere, can you come?" It was Jock's voice.

She ran to the door, her heart in her mouth and flung it wide open—Jock Airlie was standing on the landing “Could you come?” he said. “He’s asking for you and is quiet and sensible. Ruth’s asleep still.”

“Oh! yes,” she said nervelessly, “I will come.”

“And you’ll remember how miserably ill and weak he is still? You’ll be quite steady and calm?” he said anxiously.

“I will be perfectly calm,” she said unhesitatingly. “But tell me, how did he know I was here.”

“I don’t know! He asked for you and I asked him what made him think you were here? He says he’s known all along.”

The girl reeled a little and stopped short. “Is anything up?” Jock asked.

“Oh no—I’m all right,” she replied steadily; but in that one moment the iron of anguish had entered yet deeper and more bitterly into her soul.

The room in which Lumley lay was a little less dark than it had been during the days that had just gone by. Vere walked quietly in, and as quietly to the side of the bed wherein Lumley, gaunt and white and weak as a child, was lying.

“Mr. Lumley,” she said softly. Jock drew the nurse to the window and asked her if she had ever

seen such forget-me-nots in Town before? Lumley opened his eyes—and smiled. Vere shivered!

“How good of you—to be here,” he said in a strange weak voice, a voice very unlike his own pleasant mellow accents—and then he lay looking at her as if the very sight of her was all-sufficient for his contentment.

Vere bent down over the bed. “You are better, much better,” she said very tenderly. She had not forgotten that he was bound to another woman, but he was so weak, so pitifully weak that she did not seem to think it worth while to remember anything else.

“Yes—I got smashed.” Then after a pause—
“Can’t you sit down?”

She put a chair by the bedside and sat down facing him, then by some instinct of tenderness she laid her cool firm hand upon his white wasted one as it lay outstretched upon the coverlet. His fingers closed willingly over hers and he smiled again.

“Stay there,” he said drowsily. And there Vere stayed.

The painter sank into a sound sleep and Vere was a prisoner, for he held her hand tightly so that she could not release it. “I can’t move,” she said in a whisper to the nurse.

"No, you'll do more good sitting there," she whispered back. "The poor thing has worried his heart out about you ever since I came. You just sit there."

So Jock, with a friendly pat on her shoulder, and a cheery smile,⁶ left her, and presently Mrs. Jock came in on tiptoe, and put her arm round her neck and kissed her tenderly with a murmur that she had known all along that it would be all right and "I'm so glad darling, so glad," she ended.

Then she too crept away and Lumley still slept on, quietly on, and the girl who loved him watched steadily for the awakening which would mean to her the birth-hour of utter desolation.

CHAPTER XIV.**A GIRL'S GETHSEMANE.**

"Love casts its whole living into the treasury. . . . It cannot keep its cruse of ointment : the instinct of its being is to give. Wherever you find love you find self-denial."

AND after about three hours Lumley awoke, still firmly holding Vere's hand. He did not look surprised to see her there but smiled at her and said in a voice that was perceptibly stronger and more like his own, "Darling, how good of you to stay there."

Her heart grew sick at his words, but she was brave, aye and she was loving too, for she smiled back as if the tears were nowhere near to her eyes and the future was as golden as the sunset of a summer day.

"I have been here a long time," she said gently, "and now nurse is going to turn me out."

"And Miss Nugent must have her dinner," put in the nurse, seeing the shadow of a remonstrance in his eyes."

"Yes, go and get your dinner, dearest," he said, all at once assuming a tone of proud possession of her. "But," anxiously, "you'll come back afterwards, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, sir, she shall come back," said the nurse. "I'll take care of that."

"I will come back," said Vere.

She got safe into the shelter of her own room before the Airlies knew that Lumley was awake again. And once there she gave way altogether and hid her face in the bedclothes, sobbing piteously. "Oh, how shall I bear it. He has forgotten—he has forgotten! And every day will make it worse and worse, harder and harder! Oh! my dear, my dear, it would be easier if you did not love me quite so well."

She was still sobbing when Mrs. Jock came in search of her.

"Oh! my dear, my dear," she cried, "but you must not cry like this. It is all well with him now—he will soon pull round again. You are not used to seeing him like this, but it won't be for long, dear child, and he is so seraphically happy. It did my heart good to see his dear old face looking as pleased as Punch in spite of its pallor."

Vere got up off her knees.

"I got upset a bit, I think," she said, unsteadily.
"As you say, I'm not used to it."

Some instinct prompted her to say nothing of what she had learned about Mrs. Hope and her engagement to Lumley. For she had resolved that while she was necessary to his well-being, she would let things remain on their present footing. When he was once more strong and well, she would go quietly away so that there should be no embarrassment, no complications. There should be no torrent of reproaches from Mrs. Hope on the score of her trying to make Lumley break faith with her.

Lumley did not forget—whatever other failings he had in the way of forgetfulness—that she had promised to go back to him—and as soon as Miss Nugent had finished dinner she came down-stairs with a request that she would go to him. "I am going to bed almost immediately, Miss Nugent," she said, "but Nurse Collins will be in charge and will give you a hint when you ought to go away. Keep him as happy and satisfied as you can—it will be the salvation of him."

"And you do think," said Vere anxiously, "that Mr. Lumley is better."

"Oh! yes, distinctly better," she replied. "I expect the doctor will be delighted when he comes in last thing."

So the doctor unmistakably was! He came in soon after ten o'clock, and found Miss Nugent sitting by the bed, her hand fast clasped in Lumley's wasted one.

Vere tried to draw it away, but Lumley would have none of it. "No—no—don't," he said quickly, "there is no reason why the doctor, and everyone else for that matter, should not know."

"Ah—a new nurse, I see," said the doctor by way of comment and to spare Vere's blushes somewhat.

The girl was not blushing—you must be happy or ashamed to blush and she was neither, she was only utterly wretched, and looked it. Indeed the doctor thought he had never seen a sadder-looking girl to be a man's happy sweetheart. "A new nurse I see," he said pleasantly.

"Yes—and the best medicine for me in all the world, doctor," said Lumley proudly.

"Ah! well, I am very glad you're so much better. Take care not to overdo the dose, that is all."

He patted the patient lightly on the arm, and with a bow and a smile at Vere, left them. "I see you've got new arrangements upstairs, Mrs. Airlie," was his first remark when he went into the morning room where Mrs. Jock and her spouse were sitting.

"Oh! yes—such a happiness that it has all come

right," she cried, "and it was all grievously wrong until this very afternoon."

"How so?"

"By a mistake—a pure mistake, doctor," she replied.

"And now I suppose Mr. Lumley is very happy?"

"Oh! perfectly so, I'm sure," she answered.

"And the young lady—is she—er—er—very much attached to——"

"To George—oh! yes—she is very very much in love with him," Mrs. Jock cried. "That's the beauty of it all."

"I thought she looked sad—as if——"

"Oh! no, *nothing of that sort*, I assure you," Mrs. Jock broke in with much emphasis. "But of course, she has been desperately anxious all these days, just as we have been—and she is a girl who feels very deeply, so that I daresay it will take some days before she really looks herself again."

"Ah! I see. Well," holding out his hand, "Mr. Lumley is decidedly better to-night and I hope he will go on quite easily now. I'm very glad too that everything has happened to come right in other ways for him. Such a thing could not have come about more fortunately—for his good, that is. Good-night, Mrs. Airlie."

"Good-night, doctor," said Mrs. Jock, cheerily.

So a few more days passed on, Lumley with each one improving more and more, growing stronger and less troubled by the knock on the head which had laid him low, and with every hour that Vere spent in his company becoming more and more happy and contented with his life.

And during all this time Vere Nugent nursed the knowledge that, although he had apparently forgotten the fact, he was engaged to another woman, that she was helping to build his health up to an end which she would not be able to share, that when he talked, as he did, so happily and glowingly of the future, she would not be with him when it came. And as each day went by she grew more sick at heart and showed her trouble plainly in her sad and wistful eyes.

And at last the happy day came when he was able to get up, and he was allowed to totter downstairs in a very cautious and uncertain fashion and was comfortably installed on a wide and capacious lounge and given Vere to "keep him very quiet and good." And somehow during that afternoon Vere came to a realization of the truth that the sooner she went away from St. John's Wood, the better.

So when Mrs. Jock came down to breakfast the

following morning she found a note addressed in Vere's handwriting, lying beside her plate. "Why, what's this?" she exclaimed.

"DEAREST MRS. JOCK," it said, "I have suffered all that I knew in silence every since that afternoon Mrs. Hope was here, because it was plain that Mr. Lumley had forgotten his engagement to her, and I wished him to get well before I went away, unless he remembered it. He is well enough now not to have a relapse and I shall be at the Fish Ponds before you receive this. I am going to put all my things together and it will be the most kind if you will just let me take my own line from now. I think I shall go to Switzerland for the summer—I have plenty of money for that—and in the autumn look out for work of some kind.

"You've been awfully good to me, dear Mrs. Jock, and I'm most grateful. Be good to me still in not trying to keep me in England.

"Your grateful and loving

"VERE."

CHAPTER XV.

AT LAST!

"There is a past which is gone forever ;
But there is a future which is still our own."

"Well!" cried Mrs. Jock. Then she went off to Lumley's room. "Can I come in?" she asked.

"Oh yes," the nurse replied.

"Nurse, I want to speak to Mr. Lumley alone," Mrs. Jock said. "Will you leave us?"

"Certainly."

Lumley turned his eyes wonderingly on the resolute little lady, who was just then looking more resolute than ever. "Is anything the matter, Mrs. Jock?" he asked, but not in an alarmed tone at all.

"Something may be very much the matter," she replied gravely. "Can you think yet, George?"

"Oh! yes, tolerably well."

"Well, then, do you think you ever asked Mrs. Hope to marry you?"

He stared at her for a moment as if the idea had not won any understanding from him. "I don't

think I quite follow you," he said in a perplexed way.

"No? then I'll make it clearer. You are not engaged to Mrs. Hope?"

"To Mrs. Hope? Good God, no! I am engaged to Miss Nugent," he answered promptly.

"So I thought," dryly. "Vere, however, apparently thinks otherwise."

"Of course she does. How could she under any circumstances contemplate a situation so ludicrous as my being engaged to Mrs. Hope? It's absurd on the very face of it."

"I know it is but Vere does think so. And she has gone off to the Fish Ponds to get out of the way of—of your billing and cooing, I imagine," with a wild laugh.

I am bound to say that when Lumley with incredulous eyes had read the poor child's letter he, so far from being distressed by it, went off into the wildest fits of laughter.

"There's nothing to laugh at," remarked Mrs. Jock vexedly. She herself had been laughing almost hysterically but a moment before.

"No—but the situation, even in suggestion, is *too* funny," he cried. "Still—to be serious—how could she have got such an idea?"

"I imagine Mrs. Hope told her so."

"Oh! she couldn't—it's impossible."

"I don't know. Anyway, you are quite sure that you are not mixed up in anything of the kind?"

"Quite sure."

"Do you remember what you did the afternoon that you had your accident?"

"Yes—I went to see several people, Mrs. Hope among them."

"Why did you go to see her?"

"Because she wired to me to go and see her on important business."

"What was it?"

"Well—I don't think I ought to tell you that," he said hesitatingly.

"Oh!"

Mrs. Jock's tone expressed volumes. Lumley went on eagerly, "But I am perfectly sure of one thing, that I did not leave her house in anyway pledged to her; in fact, I had every intention in spite of what I had said, in a very bad temper, to you, of asking Vere again before very long. I really don't think Mrs. Hope could have given her to understand that. She must have mistaken something *I said*, since then. Anyway, I shall get up and

go down to the Fish Ponds and stop her going away."

"You will do nothing of the sort, George," Mrs. Jock cried.

"Oh! yes, I shall. You'll go with me, won't you, and I daresay Jock will be good-natured and go too. And then there'll be Blackwood who is a host in himself."

"I won't answer for the consequences," Mrs. Jock said in a scared tone.

But Lumley did not mind. He made a remark in a perfectly quiet and unmoved tone such as made Mrs. Jock feel more assured than anything else could have done, as to his state of health, for he said, "D—— the consequences," and then he looked up at her with a laugh and said, "Really, Mrs. Jock, I beg your pardon, how exceedingly rude of me."

But he was firm, all the same: neither friends or nurse nor doctor made the smallest impression on his resolution. He had made up his mind to go down to the Fish Ponds to put everything right with the girl he loved, and all their arguments were simply as so many words uttered to the winds.

Blackwood alone, who had gathered a very fair idea of the position of affairs, encouraged him in his

purpose. "I'll telegraph to the groom to meet us, sir," he said suggestively.

"Yes : and tell him to say nothing in the house about it," said Lumley promptly.

Eventually Mrs. Jock agreed that Lumley and Blackwood and the nurse left in charge of the case should go down by the twelve o'clock train and that she and Jock would follow two hours later ; and in due course, feeling thoroughly shattered and with a splitting headache, Lumley and his attendants arrived at the station for the Fish Ponds.

To ease his master's mind Blackwood at once made inquiries—and through him Lumley learned that Miss Nugent had arrived in the early morning, that she had hired a rough spring cart which was generally used for conveying luggage and parcels about the country, and had reached the Fish Ponds looking very pale and weary. Lumley knew that cart, having used it on several occasions himself, and did not wonder at it. He also gathered, however, that Miss Nugent was very busy packing her things with the help of her maid, and that she had told the groom that she should want him to drive her down to Parkeston that evening so as to be in time for the Antwerp boat.

And it was wonderful how coolly Lumley took it,

perhaps because his poor battered head was aching so badly.

They drove up to the house by the back way, and stopped at the side entrance instead of going round to the front door. "Miss Nugent is at lunch, sir," the parlormaid said in reply to his questions.

So Lumley walked, tottered, I ought more correctly to say, to the dining-room and there distinguished himself by fainting dead away.

"I was afraid it would be too much for him," was Blackwood's comment, while in his heart he thought that escape from Mrs. Hope was worth a little suffering and over-fatigue of body. "No, don't get flurried, Miss Nugent—a little brandy and water, not too weak. Yes, that's it. He'll be all right in a minute or two."

Lumley was lying on the sofa in the drawing-room when he came to himself again, and Vere was bending anxiously over him with all her heart in her eyes.

"It's all right—don't be frightened," he was able to say.

"Oh! but you oughtn't to have come," she cried reproachfully.

"Neither ought you," he retorted weakly.

But he was soon almost himself again, and Blackwood came with a basin of strong beef-tea, which

he took and felt all the better for, and then as soon as they were left alone, he and Vere came to a distinct and settled understanding.

"I don't know how she could have told you that she was engaged to me," he said in astonishment, when Vere had told him all.

Vere was silent for a minute. "Well, do you know, now I look back calmly, I don't believe she did actually say that. What she did say was, 'Yes, I wish you to understand that I am engaged to him.' Of course that is not the same as positively declaring that she was engaged to you."

"There's not much difference—the lie is just the same," said Lumley uncompromisingly. "But all the same, I think it was excessively nasty of you to run away like that without giving me a chance of telling my story. I think you ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself and you know you're not, not a bit."

"Well," said the girl, slipping close down beside the couch. "I am and I am not. Don't you understand that if it had been so, I couldn't—*couldn't* have argued the subject out with you or her, or Mrs. Jock. Indeed," raising her lovely eyes to him, "I went on as long as I could without saying a word, until I thought you were on the road to recovery, and then, all at once, I felt as if I hadn't

strength to go on any longer—I only wanted to get away to hide myself—that was all.”

“Darling,” was all that Lumley could find to say.
“My darling, my love.”

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“MY DEAREST RUTH,” wrote Mrs. Hope, a week later, “I feel that I *must* write and tell you my *news*. You have always been so sweet and kind and good to me and I know that you will *rejoice* with me and for me! I have *at last* consented to marry Hughie Damery, after hesitating for a *long* time—*months* indeed—because as you know I am *several* years older than he is and people do make such a ridiculous fuss about a year or two if it is on the woman’s side, though *nobody* seemed to think anything of it when I married Mr. Hope, who was *thirty* years my senior. I am very, very happy, and Hughie has always been *devoted* to me. We are going to be married *at once*.

“By the bye, I see that your friend Lumley, the painter, is going to marry Miss Nugent. Give them my best wishes, At the same time I *must* say I *do not* envy the girl. Lumley is the greatest flirt in London.

“Always, dearest, your attached friend,

“GWEN HOPE.”

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"Ya'as—goin' to be married," said Hughie Damery, the next time Jock Airlie met him. "Aw'fly devoted and all that. Ya'as, she *is* a bit older than me—that's what everyone tells me. But then, she's so beastly *chic*, dontcherknow—eh, what!"



1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions and activities. It emphasizes that proper record-keeping is essential for transparency and accountability, particularly in financial matters. The text suggests that organizations should implement robust systems to track every detail, from budget allocations to expenditure reports.

2. The second section addresses the challenges faced by organizations in managing their resources effectively. It highlights the need for strategic planning and the allocation of funds based on long-term goals. The author argues that without a clear vision and a structured approach, organizations risk mismanaging their assets and failing to achieve their intended purpose.

3. The third part of the document focuses on the role of leadership in ensuring the success of an organization. It stresses that leaders must be proactive in identifying potential risks and opportunities, and they must communicate these insights effectively to their teams. The text also discusses the importance of fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration, which are key drivers of organizational growth.

4. The fourth section explores the impact of external factors on an organization's performance. It notes that organizations must remain vigilant in monitoring their environment, including market trends, regulatory changes, and technological advancements. The author suggests that organizations should develop flexible strategies that can adapt to these external influences, ensuring their continued relevance and success.

5. The final part of the document provides a summary of the key points discussed and offers some concluding thoughts. It reiterates the importance of maintaining high standards of integrity and ethical conduct throughout all organizational activities. The author concludes by encouraging organizations to embrace change and to continuously seek ways to improve their operations and services.

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